MOTHERS IN ISRAEL

J. S. FLETCHER

Tiny Tim.

"God bless us everyone!" prayed
Tiny Tim,
Crippled and dwarfed of body, yet so
tall
Of soul, we tiptoe earth to look on him
High towering over us all.
He loved the loveless world nor
dreamed indeed
That it at last could give to him
the while,
But pitying glances, when his
only need
Was but a cheery smile.
And thus he prayed "God bless
us every one!"
Enfolding all the creeds within
The span None.
Of his child heart; and so deep in
Was never Saint than man

J.

Back cover.

MOTHERS IN ISRAEL

A STUDY IN RUSTIC AMENITIES

By J. S. FLETCHER

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PREFACE

THE following story is intended to illustrate a certain phase of village life which may seem incredible to town-dwellers who only know the rural districts by repute, or by occasional visits to the country, but is by no means so to the people who have, as strangers, taken up their residence in Arcadia for some considerable period, and have accordingly had opportunities of making practical acquaintance with rustic life and character.

That the English village is singularly free from certain of the more objectionable vices and sins of the town is a fact which no one who knows it would ever dream of endeavouring to deny. But for the exhibition of certain sins and vices which are in their way quite as objectionable, and, possibly, from a rural

(and certainly from a Christian) standpoint much more culpable, the village leaves the town far behind. No one need trouble himself to contradict the saying that "human nature is alike all the world over"; no wise observer of human nature will ever contradict the man who affirms that you see certain sad failings of human nature exhibited much more in one place than you do in another. There are vices and sins and crimes which are peculiar to the town; there are crimes, sins, vices which are peculiar to the country.

No one who has spent a number of years in an English village, and has used a moderate amount of eyesight and hearing, dare deny, upon his conscience, that, amongst the rural population, Lying, Slander, Evil-Speaking, and Malice are conspicuous sins. It is not too much to say that they form an Atmosphere. Nor can one truthfully say less than that Atmosphere is chiefly created by Woman.

It is a sad thing, but one of infinite truth, that the Woman of the rustic commune finds her chief interest in life in the cultivation of that peculiar form of sin which our grand-

fathers styled Back-biting. The Lady of the Hall; the Other-Half of the Parson; the Good-Wife of the Farmstead; the Woman of the Cottage; all these, in their degree, are at all times ready to hear scandal, to improve upon scandal, to spread scandal. They have no greater pleasure—I speak of them as a Whole—than to slay a reputation and to destroy a good name. If the name and reputation be those of a stranger, good; if of a woman, so much the better.

The two women chiefly dealt with in these pages were real characters. They are both dead. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*—yet, I have often wondered how many ghosts of the innocents whom they slew rose up before them when at last the beams were removed from their own eyes.

J. S. FLETCHER.

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MOTHERS IN ISRAEL

CHAPTER I

THREE PERSONS MEET

At the extreme end of the long High Street of St. Quentin's, its quaint gables and dormer windows silhouetted against the lace-like drapery of the west front of the famous Abbey Church which rises high and massive above the little red-roofed houses beneath it, stands the Hooded Falcon, one of those ancient hostelries in which the spirit of a long dead age still seems to linger. For some centuries the upper part of it has looked as if it meant to topple over into the street beneath at any moment that seemed good to it, but there is an appearance of serene confidence about the lower stories which belies this apparent danger. Not even a perfect stranger to the place could resist the appeal of that serenity—it is made

up of so much that is alluring. The long, low windows, sheltered by the projecting and threatening story above them, the gleams of firelight scintillating in their small panes, set there in leaden frames long generations ago, the open door, revealing a wealth of old oak, old brass, old china which makes many mouths water—these delights constitute a perpetual invitation to the traveller, the idler, and the lover of an old-world atmosphere. Once upon the cobble-paved High Street of St. Quentin's and you are drawn to the Hooded Falcon as flies are drawn to the honey pot.

Within one of the small, oak-panelled parlours of the Hooded Falcon there sat, one afternoon in May—the year of that May, though it matters not, has not long slipped into the gulf of years—two elderly men of whom any one with half an eye would at once have said that they were eminently respectable, well-to-do farmers. They looked to be of about the same age, but a critical inspection of them revealed the fact that they were of somewhat different dispositions and temperaments. One, apparently the elder—a man of big-boned, loose-jointed frame which seemed to be held together by his neatly cut suit of pepper-and-salt riding cloth—bore in his

weather-beaten, deeply lined face (smooth-shaven except for a fringe of whisker) a marked tendency to taciturnity and to brooding; he held his head at a downward angle and knitted his brows as he stared at the fire. The other, who betrayed signs of a joyous disposition in the fact that his riding coat and breeches were fashioned of a loudish check, and that he sported a fancy waistcoat, was a stoutish man, blue and beaming of eye, ruddy of cheek, and grey of whisker. Unlike his companion he held his head in the air and stared at the ceiling.

Of these two gentlemen, one, the stoutish man, was smoking a cigar; the other, the loose-jointed man, was smoking a long pipe. Each had a glass containing an amber-tinted liquid at his elbow.

"So this here young minister that's to take the place o' Mestur Robinson while he's away for his health may be expected any day now, Mestur Hancock, I reckon?" said the stoutish man. "Of course he'll have to be here before Sunday."

"I've been expecting to hear of his coming every day, Mestur Gill," replied Mr. Hancock. "This is Wednesday; yes, I should think he'll come to-morrow or Friday, will the young man."

"Let's see, what's his name? I clean forgotten it," said Mr. Gill, sipping at the contents of his glass. "Mestur—what is it?"

"Warwick, sir, is the young man's name—John Warwick. The Reverend John Warwick, of course," replied Mr. Hancock solemnly.

"Very clever young fellow, by all accounts, eh?" said Mr. Gill.

"Yes, sir, one of the cleverest young men in the ministry, so we were informed: a man that's going to make a name. I understand, too, Mestur Gill," continued Mr. Hancock, rubbing his chin reflectively, "that the young man is not without means of his own—very comfortably off, apart from his stipend, as they term it."

"Dear-a-me!" said Mr. Gill cheerily. "Why, come now, that's a bit of good news, Mestur Hancock. I allus like to hear of a man 'at has a bit o' brass behind him, minister or no minister. It's none oft that ministers is blessed wi' t' goods o' this world."

"He's a very superior young man i' many respects, is Mestur Warwick, I understand," observed Mr. Hancock. "We've been fort'-nate i' getting him, but it appears that he was anxious to spend a year or so with a village congregation—for the experience, as it were."

"Aye, for sure," said Mr. Gill. "So t' doctors think 'at Mestur Robinson 'll be away a year, do they?"

"That's what they advised," replied Mr. Hancock. "So long for the voyage out to Australia, and so many months' sojourn in that country, and so long for the voyage back would make up about a year, they said. They considered 'at Mestur Robinson's lungs would be quite sound by then."

"An' I hope they may!" said Mr. Gill. "He's a very nice, quiet gentleman, is Mestur Robinson; I've never had no complaint agen him. Here's his good health!"

He emptied the contents of his glass and drew out a big silver watch from his fob.

"My word!" he exclaimed, "it's nearly four o'clock. I must away home; I want to see my men before they stop work."

Mr. Hancock laid down the churchwarden pipe.

"Aye, and I must away, and all," he said. "We're very much okkypied on our land at present, and one doesn't fall to sit idle. However, an odd glass and a pipe when you come into town is no great harm."

Five minutes later, as the two friends rode their stout cobs out of the yard of the Hooded

Falcon, and turned them in the direction of the Abbey Church, they passed a young man, who, guide-book in hand, was gazing earnestly at the rose-window which forms the glory of the west front. He glanced at them as they passed: they glanced at him.

"Deal o' these tourists about," said Mr. Gill, when they had passed on. "T' owd church draws them from all over t' world."

"Aye," sighed Mr. Hancock, "there's a deal of folk i' this world that seems to have naught to do. Now, it's all right, is that, for old folk that's finished their toil; but young men like that there should be usefully employed, not wasting their time gazing at old buildings, Mestur Gill."

The subject of these remarks closed his guide-book soon after the two farmers had passed, and turned his attention to the Hooded Falcon. He gave it a momentary glance, advanced to the door, entered the hall, and found himself confronting a motherly looking landlady, who wore cherry ribbons in her smart cap. He saluted her politely.

"Can I have some ale and some bread and cheese, ma'am?" he inquired.

"Certainly, sir," replied the landlady, throwing open the door of the coffee-room and

motioning the stranger to enter. "You shall be attended to at once if you will please to walk in and sit down."

Thus welcomed, the young man strode into the coffee-room and disencumbered himself of a strong knapsack which he had carried upon his shoulders. He was presently waited upon by a smart young woman, who brought him a tray whereon was set out a dusky loaf of bread, a ripe Stilton, a dish of fresh lettuce, and a foaming jug of ale, and, after asking if there was anything more she could do for him, left him to enjoy his simple repast, and to stare at the old furniture, the old china and pewter, the old engravings, and the collection of framed samplers which ornamented the apartment. While he ate and drank and stared about him the scent of dried rose-leaves filled his nostrils with subtle fragrance. He laughed—a soft joyous laugh of contentment.

The waiting-maid came into the coffee-room on some pretext—her real errand was to indulge in surreptitious glances at the stranger, whom she had already recognised as a handsome young man. She gained a general idea that he was fairly tall, and of a fine, athletic figure; that his handsome,

clean-shaven face was very boyish; that his dark hair was inclined to be curly and formed itself here and there in ringlets about his temples; she also saw that his eyes were dark and large, and, she thought, not without a spice of fun in them. Somewhere, deep down in her heart, she sighed, wondering how it was that there were so many nice-looking young men amongst the tourists who came and went, and so few amongst the young men of the town. And as she mended the fire, which needed no mending, she wished the young gentleman would speak to her.

"Perhaps," said the stranger, suddenly breaking in upon her reverie, "you can tell me how far it is from here to Applemarney?"

The waiting-maid blushed, hesitated, shook her head.

"I'm sorry I can't, sir," she said; "I've not been long in these parts. But I'll inquire of the mistress."

Coming back presently, and glad of an excuse to take an open look at him, she said:

"The mistress says, sir, that if you'll be kind enough to step into the bar when you've finished your lunch she can tell you how far it is to Applemarney, and how to get there."

"Thank you," said the stranger. He drank

off the rest of his ale, having already consumed a healthy man's allowance of the solid food, and went out into the stone-flagged hall, where the landlady met him with that gracious smile which a handsome woman of fifty invariably bestows upon a good-looking youngster of half her age.

"You are wanting to get to Applemarney, sir?" she said inquiringly. "To be sure, it's nine miles from here; but you can have a fly—there's no railway there—it's in the loneliest district hereabouts. Or, if you don't want a fly, it so happens that the carrier's cart for Applemarney is in our yard at this moment —comfortable, but slow."

The stranger's countenance, which had betrayed no enthusiasm at the prospect of riding in a fly, lighted up at the mention of the carrier's cart.

"A carrier's cart!" he exclaimed; "ah, that is something I have never ridden in. Do you think there would be room for me in it?"

"I'm sure there would, sir," answered the landlady. "It's very seldom that the carrier has more than one or two passengers. But if you walk into the stable-yard there, sir, you'll see him—Joseph Wright his name is. He's a character, as we say about here, and

perhaps you'll think him a bit rough and crusty, but he's an honest man; he and his sister take care of the chapel at Applemarney. They're well-known people."

Thanking the landlady for her information the stranger went out into the stable-yard, glancing with interest at the various objects which met his eye. Here and there a horse, tired of doing nothing, looked out of the half-door of its loose box; here and there a stable-lad scratched his bare elbows and nibbled at bits of straw. A goat was busy at the corner of a half-used hayrick; an old sheep-dog lay in a patch of the afternoon sunlight. At the end of the yard was a vista of garden and orchard—the apple-trees were in bloom, and the pink-and-white made spots of vivid colour against a background of blue sky and green fields.

Turning a corner of the yard, the stranger came upon the carrier and his cart. The latter, a great, lumbering vehicle, drawn by a stout horse which was already between the shafts, was covered by a dome-like tilt of dark cloth, along the sides of which advertisements of various commodities, such as Somebody's Blue, Somebody Else's Biscuits, and another Somebody's Soap, had been pasted or tacked. But

the stranger at that moment paid small attention to the cart—he examined the carrier with minute care. And after looking at him for a moment he said to himself that here was one of the oddest figures he had ever seen in his life.

The carrier was a tall, thin man, of apparently fifty-five or sixty years of age. The greater part of him was completely hidden in a horseman's caped-cloak which must have been made for some more corpulent person many years before. Beneath it appeared a pair of attenuated ankles encased in grey stockings which terminated in a mighty pair of hobnailed boots; above it a slouched hat, with the brim turned downwards, was secured to the carrier's head by a woollen comforter which had presumably been knitted but recently, since it was still in possession of its original bright scarlet hue. But these matters were not so interesting to the stranger as the carrier's face proved to be when it was turned full upon him. It was a long, lean, lantern-jawed face, clean-shaven, hard-bitten, brown as a nut, and out of it, as a rock juts out of a promontory, protruded a massive nose, high in the bridge and sharp at the point. On either side the nose was a beady, twinkling blue eye; beneath the nose

was a straight slit of a mouth; below this slit, which, once closed, looked as if it would never open, was a square chin that might have been carved out of brown granite.

"I believe you are the carrier for Applemarney," said the stranger, approaching this remarkable figure.

"If ye believed owt else," answered the carrier, with a strange quality of surliness, "ye'd be a liar."

"If I may do so," continued the stranger, "I should like to ride with you to Applemarney."

The carrier turned and regarded the stranger with some interest. Seeing a handsome young gentleman in a grey tweed suit and a straw hat ornamented by a gaily coloured band, he frowned and then rubbed his chin.

"And what might ye be wanting at Applemarney?" he inquired gruffly.

"Well, the fact is, Mr. Wright," replied the stranger, smiling, "I'm your new minister, Mr. Warwick, and I've a fancy to ride in your cart. No objection, is there?"

Joseph Wright started as if his old horse had suddenly broken a long friendship and kicked him. He gazed at the youthful figure

in astonishment, and then stretched out a big, bony fist.

"Weel, I never did!" he exclaimed. "T' new minister! Thou niver says? Gow, but thou'rt a young un—some of 'em'll say thou's nowt but a lad. Never mind, thee stick to me, parson, and I'll stick to thee. Well—well—well—well—well! Bless my soul! No, I never did, i' all my born days. I wonder what our Bet 'll say when she sees thee? Howsumiver, t' beds is aired."

"So I can ride, Mr. Wright?" asked Warwick, shaking the carrier's hand.

"Ride?—Aye, an' welcome. But thou mont call me Mestur, parson—I'm none used to it. Our Bet—that's mi sister, Elizabeth—thy housekeeper—she calls me Our Joa, but everybody else calls me Joäsiph."

"Very well, Joseph," said the young minister. "When do we start?"

"We start as sooin as ever Little Sunshine's ready to start," replied Joseph. "As sooin as iver she presents hersen in this here yard we mount to wur seats and off we start on another earthly pilgrimage. She'll none be so long, now. But where's yer luggage, parson?"

"Everything is coming to-morrow, Joseph," replied the minister; "and I have already

arranged for the whole lot to be delivered straight from the station. I have only a knapsack with me—it's in the inn."

"Fetch it out!" commanded Joseph—"fetch it out!"

The minister obeyed this order in all meekness, and re-entering the inn took the opportunity of paying his bill and bestowing a gratuity upon the waiting-maid. When he went out into the yard again the carrier had mounted to his seat and had driven up to the archway which communicated with the street. He sat with head bent forward, looking this way and that.

"She'll none be long, now," he said reflectively, "but women's slow—slow!"

Warwick handed his knapsack up. He suddenly saw Joseph's eyes brighten.

"Here's Little Sunshine!" he exclaimed. "Now then, come on, Joy!"

A moment later Warwick found himself seated under the tilt of the cart amongst boxes and parcels, *vis-à-vis* with a pretty fair-haired girl, whose violet eyes were regarding him with wondering interest.

CHAPTER II

THE CARRIER'S CART BREAKS DOWN

As the big cart and its strangely assorted occupants rumbled across the cobble-paved square, wherein the old Abbey rose in all its grey glory, the carrier burst into peals of laughter which lasted until he had driven through an old gateway and emerged upon a country road that lay, a straight white level, stretched out before them as far as the eye could reach.

Then, having flicked the big horse with his whip and admonished it to "come up," he turned to the girl behind him and jerked a thumb at Warwick. The girl, who had listened to his laughter with wondering eyes and slightly parted lips, turned to the young stranger with no less of astonishment. It was plain that she had some slight fear of the carrier's sanity or sobriety.

"Eh, dear, dear, dear!" exclaimed Joseph Wright, still struggling with an effort to

control his laughter, "who ever dost ta think that theer young man is, Joy? Ecod, thou'd never guess reight in fifty year. It's t' new minister. That's him!"

The girl's face flushed very red. She stretched out a little hand. "Mr. Warwick," she said timidly.

Warwick saw that she was full of amazement—that she was wondering at his youthful appearance, at his tweed suit, at the gaily coloured ribbon which ornamented his straw hat. He smiled and pressed the little hand in his own.

"Joseph," he said, "is amused to find the new minister something quite different from his expectations of him. What did you expect, Joseph—something much more venerable, I suppose?"

The carrier rubbed the end of his crag-like nose with the butt of his whip-stock.

"Why, now," he said, with the tone and air of a philosopher, "I never expected nowt. T' wisest man 'at ever I cam' across said, 'Blessed is him 'at expects nowt, for he shall get it.' Not 'at I'm sayin' 'at you're nowt, parson, for I don't know yet—I can tell ye more about that when I've known ye three months. Nay, I wor nobbut laughin' to think

o' what sich Mothers in Israel as Mistress Gill and Mistress Hancock 'll say when they see you—ye look sich a young un to be a parson. But t' young uns can do a deal o' things better nor t' owd uns can. Here's this here little lass now—shoo's nowt but a bairn yet, but shoo's a better schoolmistress nor t' owd un wor—a deal better!"

It was Mr. Warwick's turn to look astonished. He turned to the girl with fresh interest. He had already gained a vivid impression of her youth, of her slim, delicate figure, of her sunny hair, her violet eyes, and her pretty face; he had also seen that she had character and intelligence as well as charm. But, as Joseph said, she looked little more than a child. And her blushes, as he gazed at her, came quickly to her.

"The schoolmistress!" exclaimed Warwick. "Then you are Miss May, of whom Mr. Robinson wrote to me? And he told me so much of your cleverness and ability, and of how you had improved everything at the school, that I quite expected to find—well—a lady of mature years with spectacles and a stern manner."

The little schoolmistress smiled, and he saw then that she possessed a sense of humour and a love of fun.

"It was very kind of Mr. Robinson to say such kind things of me," she answered. "I wanted to please him. It is Joseph's way to say that I am so young and little and—bairnish."

"Now, then, never mind," said Joseph. "Theer's a deal o' good stuff lies i' little room. Shoo's all reight, is Little Sunshine—thou can ho'd thy own when it comes to it, can't ta, Joy? It wor only last week," he continued, turning in his seat and winking confidentially at Warwick, "it wor only last week 'at she gev' that lad of Stubbs's sich a bencilling as he weern't forget in a hurry—I lay he couldn't sit down wi' onny comfort for a day or two!"

Warwick looked his interest. The little schoolmistress gave him a queer, shy look, and he thought he saw a suspicion of moisture in her violet eyes.

"William Stubbs was a bad, wicked boy!" she said in a low voice. "I was obliged to punish him."

"And shoo did it reight, too!" assented Joseph with just pride. "She made a reight job on it while shoo wor at it; ecod, t' young warmint roared like a bull!"

"May one ask what William's fault was?" inquired Warwick. "Something very dreadful?"

Miss May made a mouth and twisted her slender fingers.

"It was dreadful!" she said with emphasis. "It was during playtime in the morning. William had found a nest of young thrushes in the hedge which runs round the playground, and when I caught him he was amusing himself and some other children by filling the poor little gaping mouths with small pebbles. And so—but it was so cruel that I don't like to talk about it."

"A' but I'll tell thee what shoo did, parson!" exclaimed Joseph with great pre-relish of his story. "Shoo collard t' young scopril by his collar, and shoo drave all t' other bairns into t' school, and shoo fost gave him and them a reight good sermon, and then shoo sent for t' stick and shoo tell'd William 'at shoo wor bahn to give him a thrashin' 'at he'd never forget. An' for all 'at t' lad raved and kicked an' fowt she got him across one of the desks i' t' end, and shoo did gi' him bell-tinker wi' that stick!—I see'd it all, 'cause I wor there, cleanin' t' schoolroom windows. An' when it wor all ovver," concluded Joseph, "shoo flung t' stick away and started to cry—just like a woman!"

The minister nodded his head at the little

schoolmistress and smiled. "Yes," he said, "Joseph is a profound student of human nature. That was—just like a woman."

Then, seeing that Miss May had no great liking for further reminiscences from Joseph, he leaned over the front of the cart, and, looking out across the country through which they were passing, observed that it was remarkably flat, and inquired how long a time the journey to Applemarney occupied.

"Aye, it is a flat land, is this," said Joseph. "It's flattest land i' all Yorkshire—ye can see fro' one side to t' other on it. Reight away i' front theer ye'll see a church tower appear ower t' tops o' some poplars—that theer church tower is Fennery Brig village, and it's four mile off yet. Applemarney village is three-and-a-half mile t' other side o' that, but there's nowt to make it out 'at we can see for a piece—ye can see wheer it is, tho', when we get t' other side o' Fennery."

"There is no church at Applemarney, I think?" said Warwick.

"No, theer isn't and theer never weer, and theer never will be," replied the carrier with some emphasis. "In t' owd days t' folk wor expected to walk to Fennery Brig to church, and I suppose 'at some on 'em did. But ye

see, when t' persecutions wor on i' Charles t' Second' time they turned a minister 'at wor varry much respected out of Fennery church yonder 'cause he wouldn't conform to t' law, an' he cam' to Applemarney and started theer, and so it cam' to be 'at sin' then theer's never been nowt but an Independent Chappil i' t' place. We'm all Independents theer—every man, woman, and child. Our present chappil," concluded Joseph with obvious pride, "wor built by a 'Merican lady i' commemoration of an ancestor of hers, an Applemarney-er, 'at went out to that theer country wi' t' Pilgrim Fathers as they called 'em. It's a varry fine buildin' an all, but it would do wi' a bit o' doin' up now—there's been no repairin' done sin' it wor built, fotty year ago. It 'ud do wi' a coat o' paint, wo'dn't it, Joy?"

"It needs several improvements," replied the little schoolmistress; "and nothing so much as a small organ."

"Ah," said the carrier indulgently, "ye say that, bairn, 'cause ye perform on the harmonium, and t' owd thing's beginning to wheeze a bit, like. Howsumiver——"

At this point the slow progress of the heavy, lumbering cart was interrupted by a sudden riving, rending sound at the rear which

culminated in a sharp crack, as of something being split. A perceptible drag was felt: the cart came to a standstill.

"Od rabbit it!" exclaimed the carrier, laying down his whip and throwing aside his rug preparatory to climbing down from his seat in front of the cart. "That's yon theer left back wheel gone! I wor afraid t' owd varmint wodn't last long, but I thowt it would see us home. Now, then, we'm stranded by the wayside."

He descended from his perch and went round to the back of the cart. Warwick, following him a minute later, found him rubbing his chin as he stared at the damaged wheel.

"There's nowt for it but to go to Fennery Brig and bring t' blacksmith and his 'prentice lad back," said Joseph, after due consideration. "We shall be here all night if I don't fetch 'em; I can't do nowt."

"Let me go for you," said Warwick. "I'm a fast walker."

"Nay, there's no need for walkin'," replied the carrier. "I shall just tek t' owd horse out and ride in on him, and he can get up a canter when he's got nowt behind him. You two mun just bide here wi' t' cart while I come back—if onny o' them gipsies cam' along they'd steyl all t' stuff out on it."

Ten minutes later Joseph had clambered on the old horse and was jogging towards Fennery Brig; the minister, standing in the road, and the schoolmistress, perched aloft on the cart, were alone. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Wouldn't you like to come down and walk about a little?" he said. "I can smell primroses in these hedgerows, and now I can see them, a little farther on."

He assisted her to alight from the cart. As they walked slowly down to where a patch of delicate yellow showed itself in the moss-carpeted bank at the foot of the hedgerows, Warwick drew out a pipe and a tobacco-pouch.

"I am sure you will let me smoke," he said. "But I am not sure if the minister of Applemarney for the time being is supposed to cultivate a taste for tobacco? Mr. Robinson, for instance?"

"He does not smoke," answered the schoolmistress; "but he once told me that he would smoke if it were not for the trouble with his lungs—he suffers great pain sometimes."

"Poor man!" said Warwick. "I hope the trip to Australia will do him good. He is much liked by his people, isn't he, Miss May?"

"Oh, yes, everybody likes Mr. Robinson," she answered quickly.

"I wonder if everybody will like me?" said Warwick musingly.

She gave him a quick, scrutinising glance, blushing a little.

"I—I don't know," she answered. "It—depends on how they take you."

"Do they like you?" he asked.

She turned over the primroses which she had already plucked from beneath the hedgerow; her head inclined a little to her right shoulder; she seemed to consider matters.

"The children and the old people, and—yes—I think almost every one in the village likes me," she answered at last, "except Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock. They don't."

"And who is Mrs. Gill, and who is Mrs. Hancock?" he inquired. "Two ladies of importance, I suppose?"

"Yes, they are the wives of the two principal farmers in the village."

"I see. And, I suppose, of great influence?"

"Oh, yes. Did you not hear Joseph call them 'Mothers in Israel' just now?"

"I did, and formed my own conclusions. And why do they not like you?"

She hesitated, arranging and rearranging the primroses.

"They—they think, for one thing, that I am much too young."

"An excellent reason. Yes?"

"And—and frivolous."

"Are you frivolous?"

She looked up at him swiftly and straightly.

"No!" she answered. "But—last winter, because it was too far to go home, and too expensive, I stayed Christmas here, and I went to two or three dances, and to the Yeomanry ball at St. Quentin's, and Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock were shocked."

"To be sure. And Mr. Robinson, was he shocked?"

"Oh, no. I told him about it, and he did not disapprove."

"I see. So those are the good ladies' reasons—you are too young, and you are fond of a little innocent amusement, eh?"

She bent her head over the primroses.

"There was another thing," she said in a lower voice. "Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock called on me together about it. They—they talked to me as if I were a criminal."

"And you felt yourself—quite innocent?"

"Yes, because it was so innocent. It was only that—that Mr. Beverley—he is a veterinary surgeon at St. Quentin's, and is often in

Applemarney—asked me to go for a ride with him in his dog-cart one day, and I went. It was Saturday afternoon, and I had nothing to do, and it was such a lovely day. But Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock said it was so—— No, I shall not say what they did say, but it was unkind and unjust. I told Mr. Robinson about that, too, and he laughed and said that Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock meant well, but were strict and old-fashioned."

"And then, I suppose, you went riding with Mr. Beverley again?"

She flashed a sudden gleam of humour upon him and smiled.

"Yes; but I took care not to let Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock know of it," she said. "For, after all, I am twenty-three years old, and they have no right to govern my conduct."

"You love flowers," said Warwick, changing the subject abruptly, and watching her fingers caress the primroses.

"I love anything that belongs to the country," she answered. "Flowers, birds, trees, the sunlight."

Warwick looked round about him. The glamour of the springtide evening was falling over the level land, the new green of the

hedgerows, the rush-bordered dykes at the highwayside. He drew a long, deep breath.

"Yes," he said, "it is good to be in the country again. I haven't seen a green field for over twelve months; I have been working in a very poor part of London. I shall find a change between Whitechapel and Applemarney."

Turning back to the carrier's cart they saw in the distance the mounted figure of Joseph Wright accompanied by the blacksmith and his apprentice.

CHAPTER III

APPLEMARNEY

So much time was spent in repairing the damage done to the broken wheel that it seemed probable that darkness would fall upon the carrier's cart ere it reached its destination. But the old horse, conscious of hunger and mindful of the good feed which awaited it on its arrival at its stable, put its best foot foremost as soon as the interrupted journey was recommenced, and made swift progress towards the village. There was still plenty of light when Joseph, pointing forward with his whip, said :

"Yon's Applemarney. Theer—wheer the poplar-trees stands up."

Warwick looked in the direction indicated. A little way in front of them and somewhat to the right of the road he saw the roofs and gables of what seemed to be a large village. There was no building in it which towered

above the rest—no church tower or spire, no sign of the turrets and battlements of castle or hall. The red-tiled roofs appeared to be those of farmsteads, granaries, barns; they were all half hidden by great trees, which Warwick could make out from their outline to be chiefly ash, elm, beech, and chestnut; sentinel-like over these, and rising gracefully high above them, were numerous poplars, slender and tapering as a Gothic spire. At the foot of these monarchs clustered wide-spread masses of fruit trees—orchards and gardens seemed to ring the whole village.

"What a well-wooded country this is!" he exclaimed. "You are literally embowered in trees."

"Aye, we've some grand bits o' timber hereabouts," agreed the carrier. "But just bide a few minutes until ye see t' oak-tree on our village green. He's a proper owd lad is that! Theer wor a man cam' lookin' about him-t' these parts one day, an' he gev' us a look-in, like, an' he were fair capped when he saw Applemarney Oak. He walked round it, and he felt it, and he did all but taste it, and then he measured it, and he telled me 'at he'd tak' his Bible oath 'at it wor at least twelve hundred years owd. That's what he said, and

he wor a scholar, wor that theer gentleman. Twelve hundred years old—that's what he said."

At this point the carrier jerked the old horse out of the highway into a by-road, which was immediately lost amongst orchards and gardens; within a few minutes more, having passed a large farmhouse set in the midst of buildings, folds, and stackyards, the cart emerged upon the village green to which Joseph had referred. It was now twilight, but Warwick saw the giant bulk of the great oak outlined against the sky. Beneath it, on the four sides of the green at its foot, lights were already twinkling in houses and cottages.

"Now this here green," observed the carrier, as the old horse turned up the road which ran all around it, "is what you might term the centre of things—the heart o' th' community. Everything of an important nature—at least in a public way—is in this green. On our side is the chappil and the parson's house—wherein I also abide. On the opposite side is the school, wheer youth is instructed. On the top side—over yonder—is the libery and institute. On the opposite is the White Cow, kept by J. Blenkinsop—I have some parcels to 'liver at t' Cow, but I'll tek you home first, parson;

our Bet wo'd sort me if I didn't. And here we are; here is our earthly abode, sir."

The cart stopped and everybody dismounted. Looking about him in the dusk, Warwick saw that he was standing at the gate of a garden, beyond which stood a house, every window of which was in darkness; at the side of the house, towering high above it, rose a vaguely outlined mass: that, he said to himself, must be the chapel.

"Come in, sir, come in," said the carrier, opening the garden gate. "Shoo'll soon hev' some light and fire and summat to eat and drink, will our Bet, although shoo doesn't expect you to-neet. Mind the step."

"Good-night, Mr. Warwick," said the little schoolmistress.

Warwick found her outstretched hand.

"But where are you going?" he asked. "You cannot find your way in the darkness."

"Oh, yes," she laughed merrily. "I have only to run straight across the green; we are used to going about in the darkness here."

She slipped away across the road, and Warwick followed the carrier up the path of the garden until they reached another which led away to the right, and presumably to the side or back of the house. As they turned the

corner Joseph stopped, and, tapping the young minister on the shoulder, spoke in a mysterious whisper.

"I thowt I'd just tell ye afore ye went in, like," he said; "ye mun understand 'at Elizabeth's one o' them wimmen wi' a tongue—shoo will hev' her say. Ye mon't tek' no notice on her; Mestur Robinson never does—he unnerstan's her. Her bark's a deal worse than her bite. Theer isn't a reighter sort no wheer than our Bet, but shoo has a habit of goin' for me now and then, 'specially when I come home wi' t' cart. So now ye'll know."

"I think I understand, Joseph," answered Warwick.

"Then we'll advance," said Joseph. "Follow me, parson."

He led the way round to the kitchen door, which he opened very cautiously. After looking round the edge of the door he walked in, beckoning Warwick to follow. Warwick stepped into a big, comfortably furnished kitchen, scrupulously neat and clean and gay with a bright fire. It was empty of human life, but on the hearth sat an enormous black cat, which, on catching sight of the carrier, stretched itself luxuriously, waved its tail, and came towards him with loud purrings.

"Now then, Roger, owd lad!" said Joseph, "where's——"

A sharp, high-pitched female voice came from some inner region.

"Is that thee, Joäsiph? An' I wonder what thou's been doin' to come home two hour late —I lay owt thou's been stoppin' at ivvery public there is atween here and t' town. But I'll sort thee if thou hes'; see if I don't."

The carrier winked at the young minister. He pulled a very solemn face and assumed a solemn voice.

"Elizabeth," he said, "ye'd better come for'rard, Elizabeth. Here's the new minister—he's come unexpected, as it weer."

A sudden crash, as if Elizabeth had dropped a plate, succeeded this announcement. Then came an exclamation of astonishment mingled with dismay; then Elizabeth appeared, framed in the doorway of the pantry, the picture of horrified surprise.

Warwick could have laughed aloud as he looked at her. She was a tall, gaunt, straight-up-and-down woman of between fifty and sixty years; thin, almost to attenuation. She was akin to the kitchen in scrupulous neatness and cleanliness; her print dress and white apron were carefully starched and ironed; her face,

wrinkled and seamed until it seemed scarcely human, shone with much polishing of soap and towel; her head was tied up in a man's red cotton handkerchief—two ends of the handkerchief stood out above her forehead like horns; and under a dome-like forehead, whereon no one had ever seen even a stray wisp of hair, were two black, bead-like eyes, out of which white pinpoints of fire shot, to disappear and to shoot out again.

"This is mi sister, Elizabeth, the housekeeper, sir," said Joseph, in more solemn fashion than ever. "Mestur Warwick wo'd ride with me, Elizabeth, and we had the misfortun' to break down on the way. I'm sure 'at you'll make the minister comfortable; I'm away to deliver mi parcels. Ye see, I browt Mestur Warwick straight here."

The figure in the doorway stood like a statue with its mouth open: Warwick moved towards it with smiling face and outstretched hand.

"I'm afraid my sudden arrival may put you about, Miss Wright," he said pleasantly. "But you'll find I'm a very easy person to please. How are you? I've heard of you, you know, from Mr. Robinson, so we're not strangers."

Our Bet took the outstretched hand as if it

had been some curious specimen of natural history, and, having held it limply for a second, let it drop, and, sitting down in the nearest chair, looked Warwick over from head to foot and began to fan herself with her apron.

"Now, if I didn't know 'at theer wor summat goin' to happen!" she said. "Eh, dear, eh, dear! and theer's neyther a fire i' t' parlour nor i' t' study, and nowt to eat i' th' house but new-laid eggs and some ham. Joäsiph, thou mun kill one o' them young fowls."

"My dear soul," protested Warwick, "there is not the slightest necessity to kill anything! And please don't light fires in either parlour or study; if you will let me sit down here by your own hearth, and if you will give me a cup of tea and boil a couple of those newly laid eggs you spoke of, I shall be amply satisfied."

"He's a very accommodatin' gentleman, is Mestur Warwick, Elizabeth," said Joseph, in tones of solemn admonition. "You'll find——"

"I'll find summat to say to thee if thou isn't off to 'liver them parcels!" exclaimed Elizabeth, turning on her brother like a fury. "An' don't thee mek' no excuses to stay at t' White Cow, or else thou'll hear about it; I weern't hev' thee sittin' theer, drinkin' more nor's good for thee. I hev' to guide our Joa," she added,

turning half apologetically to Warwick as the carrier fled hastily away. "He's all right when he's under my thumb, but now and then he goes on th' spree an' I hev' to sort him. But eh, deary me, sir, I couldn't think o' you sittin' down here i' th' kitchen! I'll hev' a fire lighted i' t' parlour i' no time, and then you shall hev' your tea there—it'll be properer, like."

But Warwick, who had a gentle but firm insistence about him, persuaded the gaunt housekeeper to let him remain where he was; and in proof of his intention of stopping there, he took an elbow chair by the fire. Elizabeth, remarking that wilful men must have their own way, placed a small table by his side, spread a snowy cloth over it, and began to prepare the simple meal for which Warwick had asked.

"Ye might ha' knocked me down wi' a feather, when our Joa cam' in and said 'at t' new minister wor here," she observed, as she bustled about the kitchen. "But I wor still more capped when I cam' out o' t' pantry theer and set eyes on you."

"Were you?" said Warwick; "why?"

"Nay, ye're that young looking! I thowt to mysen at first it's some trick 'at our Joa's tryin' to play and this here's some young

fella 'at's aidin' and abettin' him. It's a wonder I didn't go for t' two on you wi' t' rollin' pin."

"That," said Warwick, "would have been on original reception."

"Ye see," continued Elizabeth, "ye don't look like a minister—Mestur Robinson allus wears black clothes. I don't know what Mistress Gill nor yet Mistress Hancock 'll say if they see ye dressed up like one o' them towerists. Is yon theer bag all t' luggage ye've browt."

"My trunks will be here to-morrow," said Warwick. "Don't be afraid, Miss Wright; Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock shall see me in black clothes."

"Eh, you mon't call me Miss Wright!" she exclaimed. "I wor never called nowt but Elizabeth i' my life, unless it wor when I went weer theer were company manners on. An' I'm sure it matters nowt to me what t' minister weers—all I hev' to do is to keep t' house clean and cook t' meals and so on; an' I will say 'at there isn't a better housekeeper nor what I am thro' here to t' North Pole, wheeriver that may be."

"So I understood from Mr. Robinson," said Warwick. "He spoke very highly of you, Elizabeth."

"An' I'm sure he had good cause to," said Elizabeth fervently. "I've tewed and moiled for Mestur Robinson iver sin' he cam' to the place, and that's ten year sin'. He's a reight owd bachelor, is Mestur Robinson—it's my opinion 'at he'll never wed. So long as he has his books and his papers an' his meals reg'lar, and his slippers warmed afore the fire, he's as comfortable as a bug in a rug. Ye're not a wed man yourself?"

"No," replied Warwick, who was beginning to consider Elizabeth even more of a character than Joseph.

"Well, I'll give you a little bit o' good advice, seeing 'at ye look so young and innocent. Ye mun mind some o' these here lasses i' t' place, or else they'll wed you afore ye know wheer ye are. Now, there's Mestur and Mistress Gill's dowter—Maud Mary they call her—shoo's just come back fro' boardin' school and can play on t' pianny and what not: shoo's none a foul-looking lass, an' t' Gills would none be sorry to see her wed. Then there's Mestur and Mistress Hancock's dowter—her name's Ruth—shoo's at what they call a marriageable age, and a varry nice young woman shoo is, an' all, but homely, like. I lay t' Hancocks 'ud none object to her weddin' a likely young

feller, 'specially if he wor i' t' ministry, like yoursen. An' theer's that theer little school teacher, Miss May—Little Sunshine, as our Joa calls her—shoo's on the look-out for a man as keen as ever I seed a lass to be—I lay you've nobbut to say the word i' that quarter. I could ha' wished 'at ye'd been an owder, steadier sort, like; there's some sad pitfalls for a good-looking young man i' this village, and young women's none but flighty, when all's said and done. I ha' no patience wi' 'em. I'm sure I never wanted to ha' nowt to do wi' t' men. I hope you'll find t' tea to your likin', sir—it's real good tea—Mestur Robinson weern't hev' nowt but t' best. An' when you've tea'd, I could like to show you t' house; it's been a deal of anxiety to have it as clean as a new pin afore ye came. 'Let Mestur Warwick find everything in apple-pie order when he comes, Elizabeth,' was Mestur Robinson's last words afore he left for forrin parts. An' i' apple-pie order it is, an' t' bed i' t' best chamber were aired and better-aired afore that there fire this verry day."

When Warwick, duly marshalled by the gaunt figure of the housekeeper, proceeded to examine the house which was to be his abiding-place for the next twelve months, he found

that the minister for whom he was to act as *locum tenens* had very considerable ideas of bachelor comfort. On one side of a wide hall was a bright and airy parlour, tastefully furnished, and made still more attractive by a collection of well-chosen prints, two or three cases of books, and a cottage piano; on the other side was a study filled from floor to ceiling with volumes great and small, and supplied with all those adjuncts of desks, tables, reading-lamps, and easy chairs, which men who spend much time in such rooms love to have about them. Overhead were equally comfortable bedrooms and a bathroom—the latter, Elizabeth took some pains to explain, had been fitted up when Mr. Robinson first came there, and was supplied with hot and cold water. Everything, upstairs and downstairs, was as clean as human care could make it—she drew Warwick's special attention to the fact that he could run his finger along the surface of anything he liked without discovering the existence of a single speck of dust.

Warwick went to bed that night between sheets that smelt of lavender. All around him lay a subtle silence—the silence of the sleeping land awaiting the call of another springtide morning.

CHAPTER IV

LEADERS OF THE FLOCK

At an early hour next morning Warwick left his room and made his way downstairs to the kitchen. There, lacing up his boots in front of the fire, he found Joseph, who, on sight of him, started to his feet and approached him with waving arms and a face of horror.

"Eh, ye mon't come in here, parson!" he exclaimed in a hushed whisper. "Our Bet weern't hev' nobody i' t' kitchen. Mestur Robinson hissen wo'dn't dare to set foot i' t' kitchen onless our Bet tell'd him 'at he could come in. Shoo's fettling hersen up just now to get t' braikfast ready; away wi' ye afore shoo sees you!"

"I came to ask for the keys of the chapel," said Warwick, retreating meekly beyond the sacred threshold.

"Bide i' t' study apiece, and I'll bring 'em to you," said Joseph, still speaking in a hushed whisper. "We mun mind what we're doin'

wi' our Bet this mornin', 'cos shoo's on t' high horse—shoo considered that I wor a long time 'liverin' parcels last night."

Warwick at once went to the study, and drawing up the blinds looked out across the garden and the green beyond. In the fresh radiance of the May morning, the scene was infinitely refreshing to eyes which for some time had looked on nothing but the squalid streets and courts of a particularly poor district of the East End of London. There were flowers in the garden; the morning dews still hung on the fresh grass of the village green; above the ancient oak the sky was blue as sapphire. Early as it was there was plenty of life stirring. Children were already playing about the trunk of the oak; here a labourer was setting out for the fields with his team of horses; there some women were gossiping around a draw-well; across the green two men on horseback had paused to exchange greetings. Warwick opened the window to let in the fragrance of the morning and with it the morning's sounds. A thrush was singing in the holly-bush close by, and behind its insistent, clear melody, he heard a chorus of countless bird-voices singing in hedgerow and coppice, while high above the giant oak and the tall poplars the cawing of

rooks came clearly from the upper reaches of the air. He felt as a thirsty man feels who having crossed a desert comes at last to a spring of fresh water.

Joseph came in with a bunch of keys and signed Warwick to follow.

"I'll tek' ye round myself," he said, in the tone of one who confers a great favour. "There's nobody in the place as knows as much about this here chappil as what I do. Now here, ye see, is a door 'at communicates atween t' sacred edifice an' t' minister's house, so 'at ye can walk straight out o' one into t' other. An' now we're in t' chappil itsen. As I tell'd ye comin' along in the cart yesterday, it wor build i' its present form by a lady fro' 'Merica i' memory of an ancestor of hers as sailed to them parts wi' t' Pilgrim Fathers, but all t' same it wor on this varry spot 'at t' owd parson 'at wor turned out o' his livin' at Fennery Brig yonder first began his ministrations, so it's what they term historic."

"Yes," said Warwick. He looked around him and wished that the ideas of the American lady and her architectural adviser had been less utilitarian. The chapel was a four-square, barn-like structure, entirely devoid of anything in the shape of decoration or ornament. Around

three sides of it, half-way up the walls, ran a narrow gallery; on the fourth side rose the pulpit. The walls were whitewashed; the pews in the gallery and on the ground floor were painted a dull drab colour, unrelieved by line or break. In front of the railing which enclosed the pulpit stood a small harmonium. The windows from floor to ceiling were of plain glass; at this moment they were covered by white cotton blinds. In the whole place there was not a spot of colour. Warwick, as he looked around him, said to himself that this was the typical meeting-house of the strict Puritan or the stern Covenanter.

"The members o' the choir, as they've started callin' theirselves of late years," observed Joseph, "sits i' them little pews on eyther side of the pulpit. That theer long pew, 'at goes reight across t' body o' t' chappil, reight under t' minister's nose, as you might say, belongs to t' Gills an' t' Hancocks. Ye'll observe 'at it's divided i' t' middle—t' Gills sits on t' reight side and t' Hancocks sits on t' left. It wo'dn't do for em to sit one behind t' other, ye see."

"Oh, why?" said Warwick innocently.

"'Cos they're that there jealous of one another," replied Joseph in a mysterious tone. "At least, t' wimmen is."

"That reminds me, Joseph," said Warwick, "that I should like you to take my compliments to Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock as early as you can this morning, and to tell them that I have arrived and should be glad to see them. They may call at any time they please."

Joseph chuckled.

"They're sure to do that," he said. "They wo'dn't do owt else. They're a varry stiff-necked generation this 'at ye've come amongst, parson; they nobbut do what they like, and then they nobbut do it when it suits 'em. Mestur Robinson, he unnerstan's 'em, an' he lets 'em hev' their own way—'cause they weern't hev' nobody's else's. I hev' to pursue t' same policy wi' our Bet yonder: let her hev' her head and shoo'll run i' harness, but don't put t' snaffle on or else shoo'll rive all t' consarn to bits. Ye mun humour all these Applemarney folk if ye want to get on wi' 'em, specially t' Gill and t' Hancock women."

"I hope we shall get on together," said Warwick, and returned to the house. There was a bright fire burning in the parlour, and flowers from the garden set out on the breakfast table, and presently Elizabeth, arrayed in pretty much the same fashion as that of the previous night, appeared, bearing a tray on

which a variety of appetising country fare was set out. Before Warwick could greet her she favoured him with a nod of severe approval.

"Well, now, I'm sure I'm glad to see 'at you've gotten on some Christian clothes," she said, alluding to the fact that the young minister had donned a clerical suit which he had carried in the bottom of his knapsack. "There'll be them Gills and Hancocks on the doorstep afore t' morning's out, and if they'd ha' seen t' minister in them things 'at you made your appearance in, theer would ha' been summat to say! I hope you'll like your braikfast; there's toasted bacon, and new-laid eggs, and honey, and that theer cream's just come from Gill's dairy, and it's that thick that ye could stand a spoon up in it. But if there's owt more 'at ye desire ye mun let me know. Of course, I know what Mestur Robinson likes, but some gentlemen's bellies is prouder than others."

"I am sure it will all be excellent, thank you, Elizabeth," said Warwick. "Give me exactly what you gave Mr. Robinson, and I shall be satisfied."

"Why, now, if what does for him does for you, you an' me'll get on," said Elizabeth, nodding the red headdress graciously. "But of course, if there iver is owt at you tek' a

partic'lar fancy to, ye mun let me know, an' not be afraid."

Warwick promised that he would obey her behests and sat down to breakfast. When she had left the room he burst into a roar of laughter—decidedly, he said, he had come amongst some strange characters. But there was something about their rugged straightforwardness that made them likeable, even lovable already.

He was at work in the study that morning when Elizabeth's head appeared at the door and Elizabeth's voice announced Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock. As they advanced into the room Warwick recognised them as the two farmers he had seen in the square of St. Quentin's on the previous afternoon; he saw at the same moment that they did not recognise him. So far from any recognition appearing on their honest faces, there was nothing there but obvious wonder at his youthful appearance, which was accentuated by his black clothes.

"Well, now, really, Mr. Warwick, sir," said Mr. Gill, when the formal ceremonies were over and the two farmers were seated in easy chairs, each trifling with his hat; "really, you gev' me a bit of shock, sir, to find such a youthful-looking gentleman. I'd framed it in my mind,

like, that we should encounter something older, eh, Mestur Hancock?"

Mr. Hancock, who had been regarding the young minister from beneath bent brows, pursed his lips.

"I was aware that Mestur Warwick was a young man," he said quietly; "and of course some young men retains their youthful appearance to a wonderful degree. Mestur Robinson is what I call a young man—he's no more than forty—but he's not a strong gentleman, and ill-health's made him look older than what he really is. I should say that you enjoy very good health indeed, eh, Mestur Warwick?"

"I am glad to be able to say that I do," answered Warwick; "I have never been ill in my life."

"It's a rare blessing, is that!" exclaimed Mr. Gill. "When you consider what a lot of ailing folk there is in this world, it's a grand thing to meet somebody 'at's never had nowt t' matter wi' 'em."

"We were a bit surprised, like, to hear of your arrival, Mestur Warwick," remarked Mr. Hancock; "we'd considered that you'd arrive as it were to-day, and then, of course, there'd have been Mestur Gill there, and his good lady, and me and my wife, to welcome

you. However, from what I've heerd Mestur Robinson say, Elizabeth Wright 's a very good housekeeper, and very capable."

"I am quite sure that Elizabeth will make me quite comfortable, thank you," said Warwick. "It is very kind of you to have thought of welcoming me; I hope I may be allowed to call on Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill very soon."

Mr. Hancock stroked his hat and Mr. Gill scratched his ear.

"Well, of course, Mestur Warwick," said Mr. Hancock, "me and Gill there called in this morning to give you a bit of fatherly instruction, like, as to how things stands in the place, though no doubt Mestur Robinson would tell you a few of things in a letter."

Warwick inclined his head without speaking.

"Of course, you'll understand that me an' Gill here is the mainstays of the community—we'm the trustees of the chapel along with the minister for the time being, and we're deacons, and what not. It's a well-known fact, of course, that I were appointed to office a twelvemonth before Gill, through my being in the place a year or two before he came, but we make naught of senior or junior—we've continued in

amity for a matter of two-and-twenty year. So, of course, you'll look to us for any instructions, like."

"In business affairs, certainly," said Warwick, quickly.

Mr. Hancock did not exactly comprehend this ready reply—there was some note in it which was new to him. He opened his lips to speak, kept them open for a second, and went on again.

"I may say that Gill's family and mine is the considerables in the place," he observed. "So that, of course, the new minister's always expected to visit us first. I'm sure Mestur and Mrs. Gill feel it the right thing that you should come and take a friendly cup of tea with us this afternoon, sir; and I believe Mestur Gill has a similar proposition to make to you with regard to a similar event to-morrow at his hospitable abode."

"Me and my fam'ly, sir," said Mr. Gill, "will feel it a great pleasure to welcome you to-morrow. Of course, as Hancock says, him and me is the leaders of the flock, and Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill is both ladies as interests themselves greatly in the work. They'll be able to put you in the right way, sir, of doing many things. They've been very

useful to Mestur Robinson, has our respective partners, hevn't they, Hancock?"

"They have, sir, they have indeed!" replied Mr. Hancock fervently. "Mothers in Israel they are, Mestur Warwick, both them ladies. You can't do better, sir, seein' as you're a stranger and a young man, than to follow their advice and counsel."

"I'm sure," agreed Mr. Gill.

Warwick drew a desk-diary towards him.

"I am much obliged to you, gentlemen," he said quietly. "I shall be very glad to accept your invitation, Mr. Hancock, for this afternoon, and yours, Mr. Gill, for to-morrow. At six o'clock each day? Thank you. And now," he continued, having made entries in the diary and returned it to its place, "there are one or two things I want to ask you. Are there any sick people in the place upon whom I should call to-day?"

Mr. Hancock and Mr. Gill gazed at the ceiling.

"Well, now, really, Benjamin," said Mr. Gill, at last, "I'm sure I haven't heerd of any sick persons of late. There were Thomas Burton brok' his leg a piece back, but he's goin' about lively on his crutches. I can't call no others to mind."

"No," said Mr. Hancock. "The fact is, this is a very healthy village—no, I haven't heard of no cases of sickness."

"Are there any very poor people, then, whom I could call upon?" asked Warwick.

Mr. Hancock and Mr. Gill drummed upon their hats.

"Well, now, no, and there's no what you might rightly call poor folk, neither," said Mr. Hancock. "No, we're not much troubled in that way, sir. Of course there is one or two that's on t' parish, but there's nobody 'at's in want—oh, no!"

Warwick nodded. He rose from his chair and held out his hand. Without knowing exactly how they got there the two great men suddenly found themselves walking down the garden path.

"Coolish young man, yon, Gill," said Mr. Hancock.

"High and mightyish in manner, certainly," responded Mr. Gill.

"London ways," opined Mr. Hancock.

"Well, of course," said Mr. Gill indulgently, "if t' young man has a nice little fortune on his own, it mak's him independentish, like. Them 'at has brass can afford to gi' themselves airs and graces."

"It said in one of the letters of recommendation that he were a coming man," remarked Mr. Hancock. "One of this here modern school, I reckon. I expect he'll consider us very old-fashioned, but he'd have a bit of a tussle if he tried to modernise our respective helpmates, what, Gill?"

Mr. Gill chuckled, and then sighed. And then he invited Mr. Hancock to step round to his farm-house and take a glass of ale.

Early that afternoon Warwick walked across to the school. He tapped at the door; the little schoolmistress presently opened it and started and blushed.

"I am not coming in now," he said, smiling. "I want you to tell me if you know of any sick, or very poor, people that I can visit."

Miss May's eyebrows arched themselves.

"Oh, yes," she said. "There is old Hannah Miles—and Henny Simpson—and poor Burton who broke his leg, and is very poor—and there is Lucy Ward, who is dying of consumption—I can tell you where they all live."

An hour later the two maiden ladies who kept the general grocery stores were astonished to receive a visit from the new minister, who wanted to purchase and insisted on carrying away with him such things as meat extracts,

calf's-foot jelly, and new-laid eggs. But this astonishment was not so great as that of the host of the White Cow when Warwick appeared in his sanded parlour and demanded the very best and oldest port wine he had in his cellar, and tasted it before purchasing with all the knowingness of a connoisseur. He followed his strange customer to the door, and went indoors again with a sage smile.

CHAPTER V

CHEZ HANCOCK

Duly instructed by Joseph Wright as to the exact whereabouts of the Manor Farm, Warwick bent his steps in its direction soon after half-past five o'clock that afternoon. He wondered, as he went along the winding by-road which Joseph had pointed out to him, if he would be expected to go to tea at Mr. Hancock's and Mr. Gill's very often, and if those two gentlemen and their families were the only people in the place with whom social converse would be possible. It had been impressed upon him during his interview with the two farmers that morning, that in both there was the same characteristic—behind all their references to each other he had fancied that he had caught the suggestion of rivalry; it was as if each were trying to inform him, by devious methods and promptings, that it was Codlin and not Short who was his friend. Having something of a sense of humour, he

had seen the two men sitting before him in the likeness of frogs, each blown out with great self-importance, each endeavouring to outswell the other. Their references to their wives, too, had amused him ; being still young, he laughed at the mere notion of the two countrywomen ruling and controlling him. Little by little, however, he was arriving at the real facts of the situation, getting at the significance of the hints thrown out to him by that eccentric couple, Joseph and Elizabeth. It all meant that here, in Applemarney, as in Rome of old, as in Verona of the Capulets and Montagues, there were factions ; worse still, two powerful families contending for supremacy. He laughed as he thought of Joseph's remark upon the geographical position of the Gill and Hancock pews—"It wo'dn't do for one o' them to sit behind the other, ye see"—and he sighed as he reflected upon the smallness of mind which could insist upon such things as place and precedence in such a situation.

"Good heavens!" he said to himself as he strode along the lane ; "can it really be possible that in an Arcadia like this, amongst all the spring sunshine, the singing of birds, the bursting of bud and flower, the joy and

gladness of nature, such things as jealousy and spite and mean striving after place and mean insistence on being something better than one's neighbour really exist? I suppose I shall find out."

He walked on with rapid strides, and suddenly found himself before a pair of white gates, set back from the road, and covered over with a profusion of lilac and laburnum trees. Within these gates, pacing up and down a miniature carriage drive covered with red ash, Mr. Hancock, clad in his Sunday best, was at last revealed, his hands stowed away beneath his coat tails. He was ruminating on his business affairs, but as Mr. Warwick lifted the latch of the gate he caught the sound, and came forward to play the host.

"Come in, sir, come in!" said Mr. Hancock, with great heartiness. "Pleased to welcome you to the Manor Farm, sir. Knowing that you wouldn't be so well acquainted with the lie of the land I walked this way to lie in readiness at the gate. We stand back a bit from the road, you see, Mestur Warwick, and there's such a deal of wood in front of the house that you well might pass by without knowing anything in the shape of a human dwelling was there."

"You have a very pretty place here, Mr. Hancock," remarked Warwick, as they emerged upon a trim lawn, surrounded by flower beds gay with spring blooms, on the farther side of which stood a quaintly gabled old farm-house, the greater part of whose walls were covered with ivy. "It makes quite a picture."

"So-so, sir; so-so!" replied Mr. Hancock with infinite complacency. "We find little to complain of in the place. Of course, you'll understand, Mestur Warwick, that a good deal of what you see here is due to my efforts, sir. The Manor Farm was not what it is now, sir, when I first came to it—not by any means."

"You have been here for some time, I suppose?"

"Five-and-twenty years, sir, to the three-and-twenty year of Thomas Henry Gill," replied Mr. Hancock. "Thomas Henry Gill, Mestur Warwick, is my junior by two year in a many ways—on the land, in all offices at the chapel, and in age. Three of what you may term coincidences, sir, as they call 'em."

"And you have carried out great alterations, Mr. Hancock?"

"I have, sir. Come this way, a little, Mestur Warwick—we don't tea till six o'clock, and it's

still wanting ten minutes of that hour. Now you see, sir," continued Mr. Hancock, leading his guest past the side of the house and through a door which gave admittance to the farm-buildings at its rear—"you see, sir, before you, the finest farm-buildings in the neighbourhood—bar none. You'll be tea-ing with the Gills to-morrow evening. Thomas Henry Gill will tell you that he has the best farm hereabouts, but that's a little weakness of his. Go your ways anywhere you choose about these here buildings, Mestur Warwick, and you'll find sound roofs, sound doors, sound floors, sound spouting, sound everything. All done by me, sir, was all that. I'm one of them that believes in thoroughness, Mestur Warwick."

"An excellent thing to believe in," said Warwick.

"Then here, again," said Mr. Hancock, leading the way back to the front of the house. "Now you see this garden and lawn, sir: when we come here, Mestur Warwick, five-and-twenty year ago—that being two year before Gill come to the Lowlands, as they call his farm—when we came here, I say, all this was a waste and a wilderness—it had been neglected shameful. All that you now

see, sir, was carried out by me. I laid out this lawn, and these wide walks, and them flower beds and borders, and made what you might term a transformation. Untidiness and lostness about a place, Mestur Warwick, is a thing I can't abear!"

Warwick replied that everything he saw reflected the greatest credit upon his host's taste, and Mr. Hancock, swelling out with pride, thereupon led the way to the house and conducted him to the best parlour, where he left his guest for a moment while he went to announce his arrival. The best parlour looked out upon the garden, and as the windows were open there was a grateful scent of leaf and blossom, but high above it the guest's olfactory senses caught the smell of roast fowl.

He looked around him, never having been in the best parlour of a well-to-do Yorkshire farmer's house before. His eyes took in the setting of the scene quickly, intuitively. A thick, much beflowered carpet; a suite of furniture in walnut, upholstered in green rep, the smaller chairs all set stiffly against the wall, the easy ones facing each other, at absolutely correct angles, across the intervening black skin hearthrug; a round table of walnut

in the middle of the room, with a group of wax flowers in its centre, and lines of gaily bound books radiating therefrom like the points of a star-fish; a piano, swathed, as to its upper part, in silk-embroidered velvet, and crowned by a plaster bust of Beethoven. On the walls certain family portraits in oils, relieved by such ephemera as a group or two of highly coloured flowers, some pencil drawings of animals—evidently achieved as school exercises—and a quaint sampler, the colours of which were not yet faded. Over and around everything an atmosphere of old-worldness, a scent of the past.

The opening of a door caused him to turn and to find himself face to face with a big, handsome, rose-cheeked woman, instinct with life and energy, who gave him a plump hand in which she pressed his own with motherly fervour. Behind her, timid, shy, blushing, hovered a girl of twenty-two or three—a girl of her mother's generous build, but without her mother's good looks: a plain, homely girl, but the owner of a pair of soft, pathetic, appealing eyes. Warwick had realised the two—mother and daughter—in the flash of an eye.

"An' so this is Mestur Warwick?" said Mrs. Hancock, shaking and re-shaking the

young man's hand. "I'm sure we're all very glad to see you, sir, and I hope you'll be very comfortable during your stay among us; we're very plain, homely folk in these parts, and you must tek' us as you find us. This is my dowter, Mestur Warwick—my only dowter, Ruth. An' now we'll go in to the tea, for sure I am you'll be ready for it, and as for the master, why, there's never naught amiss wi' *his* appetite!"

Warwick presently found himself seated opposite Ruth at a table which, had it not been of special solidity, would surely have broken down under the weight of food which it supported. Before Mr. Hancock, at his end of the table, appeared a couple of roasted fowls, so large that a careless observer might have supposed them to be medium-sized turkeys; before Mrs. Hancock, at her end, rose a cold boiled ham into which no knife had as yet been thrust; before himself lay a round of cold beef, tempting in its layers of white and red; before Ruth, on the other side of the table, lay spread out the glittering glories of the Hancock solid silver tea-service. In the nooks and corners of the table lurked such matters as hot cakes, hot toast, delicately thin bread and butter, and dishes of conserves and

preserves: all, as Warwick was to learn, of home manufacture.

"Now, you see, Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Hancock, when knives and forks were in full swing; "if we'd only known that you were coming yesterday, us an' the Gills, as bein' the principal members of the congregation, would have seen that there was proper arrangements made for your reception. However, I believe Elizabeth Wright proves herself a very capable housekeeper to Mestur Robinson—of course, he's a bit of an invalid, poor gentleman, even when he is at his best, and has to be provided for accordingly—and she'll no doubt have seen that you've had proper meals; but now that you're here at the Manor Farm you must mak' a real good Yorkshire tea. Ruth, my love, pass Mestur Warwick the hot toast."

"I had no idea that I was to be received with such hospitality, Mrs. Hancock," said Warwick. "To be asked to feast on the fat of the land for two successive days is almost embarrassing. That is the first time I have been out to tea for more than a year."

"Is it indeed, sir?" said Mrs. Hancock. "Deary-me! Well, of course, Yorkshire folk would think it a very strange thing if they

didn't show hospitality to the minister. Mestur Robinson oft comes to tea with us, and wi' the Gills at the Lowlands, theer; but I'm sure I'm allays sore put about, when he comes, to know what to give him, for he's a weak stomach, has poor Mestur Robinson, an' he can't do wi' strong meat. Now you're a fine, healthy-looking young man, Mestur Warwick; I shouldn't think there's aught much the matter with you."

"I'm afraid there soon will be, Mrs. Hancock, if I'm subjected to so much hospitality," laughed Warwick. "I live very simply as a rule."

"Well, there is them as does," said Mrs. Hancock; "an' if it agrees with them I've naught to say agen it. Our fam'ly was always hearty eaters—on both sides; but, of course, bein' in the farmin' line they was allays out in the open air. Of course, ministers sits in their studies readin' their books and writin' their sermons, and they can't be expected to have the appetites that out-o'-door folk have. I'm sure me and Eliza Gill 's oft talked that very matter over, for we've had a deal of experience wi' ministers, old and young, and we've taken interest in their stomachs, for, as I say, you can't expect a minister to do

his duty if he isn't properly fed. Now, I'll lay anything, Eliza Gill will ha' been questioning her master all day long to-day about you, Mestur Warwick, to find out what make of young man you are, so that she'll know what to give you for tea to-morrow afternoon."

"I hope Mr. Gill will not tell her that I look very hungry," said Warwick. "She might make formidable preparations."

"Oh, she's a good provider, is Eliza," said Mrs. Hancock, solemnly shaking the flowers and beads in her best cap. "Whatever Eliza Gills's other faults and failin's may be—and we're all subject to them, Mestur Warwick, as well you're aware of it, bein' a minister, though but a young one—whatever Eliza's faults may be, there's nobody, not even her worst enemy, could say that she isn't a good provider. Of course, you know, Eliza 'll feel a bit sore that you should come here to tea before goin' there to the Lowlands, but——"

"All that there," interrupted Mr. Hancock, who had already devoured half a chicken and was preparing for further onslaughts—"all that there was settled atween me and Thomas Henry Gill this very mornin'. Thomas Henry understands me very well. He's a reasonable

man, is Gill, when he feels that there's somebody in authority over him."

"All the same," resumed Mrs. Hancock, "Eliza Gill 'll feel a bit sore, Benjamin, because, you see, Mestur Warwick, Eliza 's one of those who likes to be first in everything. And, of course, in this case it isn't to be expected, because we've been two years longer in the place than what the Gills have. 'Alongside of me, if you please, Eliza,' I says to her, oft, 'but not in front.' You must manage Eliza Gill, Mestur Warwick, while you are tekkin' Mestur Robinson's place, or else she'll presume on her position."

Warwick murmured some indefinite reply to this and accepted another slice of ham from Mrs. Hancock.

"But, of course," Mrs. Hancock continued, with a deep sigh—"of course, Mestur Warwick, there's a deal of things a minister has to contend with. Now, poor Mestur Robinson, as I've told you, enjoys weakly health—he's naught but a weakling, an' I'm sure I've oft said it's a mercy he's never been inclined to marriage—and of course he's disposed, as delicate gentlemen allays are, to let things slip by in an easy way. But it's really time somebody pulled the Sunday-school

teachers up a bit—the young women, at any rate. Now, of course, there's my dowter, Ruth, there—nobody could say a word agen her—she's that conscientious, if I do say it as am her own mother. But Eliza Gill's dowter—well, of course, she's only just left the boardin' school, and she's a bit skittish, and disposed to giggle—she ought to be watched, 'cause airs and graces isn't in place at those times. And there's the schoolmistress, Miss May—she wants watchin', Mestur Warwick."

"I understood from Mr. Robinson that she is a thoroughly dependable and capable teacher," said Warwick.

"Oh, I'm not sayin' anything about the young woman's power as a teacher," exclaimed Mrs. Hancock; "I believe she's a very good teacher indeed, and manages the childer well; but I don't hold wi' gels of her age dressin' themselves up as she does, nor wearin' fine hats, and doin' their hair in fancy styles, nor yet in goin' to dances and what not—I wouldn't allow my dowter to array herself in that manner for the world. So, as I say, Mestur Warwick, you'll have your hands full one way or another, and when you find that you want a strong hand behind you, you must just come to me.

And now, if you're sure you won't have any more, Mestur Warwick, perhaps you'll say the grace and we'll go into the best parlour."

Warwick quickly found that he was expected to make an evening of it, and he resigned himself to hearing Mr. Hancock talk of crops and prices and his own prowess as a farmer, and to Mrs. Hancock's occasional excursions into chapel matters. It was something of a relief to him when Mrs. Hancock bade her daughter, who had been sewing industriously at her mother's side, to open the piano and 'play something.' He wondered what this plain-looking girl, with the pathetic eyes, would play. A great wave of thankfulness came over his soul when he found that she loved and understood music.

Warwick's one great indoor recreation was the piano. When Ruth had left the instrument, he asked her if he might play to her, and for an hour he played on and on, forgetting everything but the keys beneath his fingers and the poems he was bringing from them. When at last he came back to consciousness, he caught a glimpse of the girl's face in the gathering dusk, and saw it transformed to something like beauty.

CHAPTER VI

CHEZ GILL

If Warwick had been able, by means of some magic carpet, to transport himself into the midst of the Gill household next morning, he would very speedily have become aware that Mrs. Hancock had not missed the mark when she declared that Mrs. Gill would feel sore because the new minister had visited the Manor Farm before visiting the Lowlands. Mrs. Gill was no less remarkable than Mrs. Hancock; she came of a long line of tradesmen who had carried on business in St. Quentin's for generations with vast profit to themselves, and she had brought Thomas Henry a tidy fortune on their marriage. Consequently, she had ideas and ambitions, mixed together with a decided disinclination to play second fiddle to anybody, and least of all to Mrs. Hancock. It was the one great grief of her life that Gill had not taken the Lowlands three years before he did—had he done so

there would have been no question as to supremacy—she, Eliza Gill, would have asserted her claim to sovereignty in no uncertain fashion. She sometimes wondered how it was that Mrs. Hancock permitted a dual rule—as in the matter of the divided pew—for she was certain in her own heart that, if that unfortunate difference of one year had been in her favour, she would have made full use of it. And because Mrs. Hancock did, ostensibly, share the reins of government with her, Mrs. Gill regarded Mrs. Hancock with suspicion, and was in a perpetual state of wonder as to what that lady really meant by such unfeminine conduct.

The Lowlands lay some little distance out of Applemarney—an isolated farmstead in the midst of level land intersected by dykes which carried away the rains of winter. Once upon a time all that land had been so much waste; it was now good land enough, and Thomas Henry Gill was well satisfied with it and its results. He was wont to declare that he would rather have the Lowlands than the Manor Farm, though he allowed that the house appertaining to the latter was a better one than his own. The Lowlands farmstead stood on a sort of oasis in the midst of the

dead flat which surrounded it. There had at one time been a religious house, a small convent of nuns, on this spot, and certain parts of it remained and had been built into the modern dwelling, which was modern only in a sense, since it dated from the time of Queen Anne. It was a rambling, incongruous building, having something of a desolate air because of its situation, which was singularly destitute of trees. Three tall elms stood guard over the farmstead, and there was a small orchard at its side, but for half a mile all around it there was neither tree nor bush in field or hedgerow. Applemarney itself lay embowered in trees a mile away, the Lowlands and its three great elms rose gaunt and spectral amidst a treeless waste.

In an ancient stone hall, once part of the conventual buildings but now transformed into a dairy, Mrs. Gill was making up butter on the morning of the day which was to see the new minister make his bow at the Lowlands. Although she kept two capable women-servants and possessed a strong and healthy daughter of twenty summers, Mrs. Gill never allowed any one but herself to make up the butter. As soon as it gathered in the churn she entered the dairy in spotless white linen and

became high priestess of the succeeding rites. She was famous for her butter, and sent at least forty pounds of it to the market at St. Quentin's every week; there was something of a gift, people said, in the way she handled it. She stood now at the stone-topped table with a golden-hued mass before her, rolling and shaping, trimming and stamping—a little, lithe woman, whose hair was inclined to be red, whose nose was sharp and assertive, whose eyes were quick as a ferret's, whose whole manner, attitude, and movements suggested self-assertiveness, activity, indomitable resolution. Near her, Miss Maud Mary Gill, a full-blown rosebud of twenty, golden of hair, blue of eye, red-lipped, with a complexion of strawberries and cream, and an expression that was sometimes languorously sleepy and sometimes youthfully pert, stood packing the butter in muslin and stowing it away in card-board boxes. She, like her mother, was clad in white linen; unlike her mother, she wore a blue ribbon, of the exact shade of her eyes, under her full throat and dimpled chin.

"A nice day we're like to have of it!" said Mrs. Gill, slapping the butter viciously yet knowingly with her wooden butter makers. "What with all this butter to mek' up—and

there'll be six-and-forty pound this week, you see if there isn't, Maud Mary—an' the silver to polish, an' the best china to get out and dust, and them gels to attend to lest they don't spoil the cookin', it'll tek' me all my time to be in readiness before Mestur Warwick comes."

"You aren't going to wear your best silk, are you, ma?" inquired Miss Gill, lazily.

"Of course I am, Maud Mary, and you're going to wear your best frock, too, and look your smartest!" snapped Mrs. Gill. "We're not going to be outdone by no Hancocks, if they have been on the land a year longer nor we have. I'll lay anything that Sarah Ellen Hancock had all her best on last night—though to be sure that black silk of hers has been in go for six years to my knowledge, and she allus pins that cairngorm brooch i' the wrong place. And she'd tek' good care 'at Ruth were wearin' her best—not that it would make much difference as to what poor Ruth wore, for there's naught would ever make her into a beauty. Best gown, indeed! I should think so! And mind you look at your best, miss—I weern't have my dowter outdone by anybody."

"Ministers never seem to notice how one's dressed," observed Miss Gill, with a pout which showed the fullness of her nether lip.

"There's ministers and ministers," said Mrs. Gill oracularly. "Old bachelors like Mestur Robinson notices nothing, unless it's such forward little minxes as that stuck-up schoolteacher, but your pa says 'at this Mestur Warwick's a very fine, handsome young man, and Mestur Robinson himself told me 'at it's very well known that he's quite independent of the ministry and has a very handsome fortune of his own. An' you might do a deal worse than marry a young man like that, Maud Mary, and let me tell you!"

"I don't think I should like to marry a minister, ma," said Miss Gill, still pouting.

"And pray who would you be for marrying, miss?" demanded Mrs. Gill with maternal asperity. "Don't let me or your pa hear of your carrying on any games wi' young men such as that flighty young madam at the school's carrying on wi' that young Beverley, or else there'll be trouble. I'll have no young men running after my dowter unless it's done clean and above-board. Not want to marry a minister, indeed! Perhaps you'd like to marry an officer in the army as would bet and drink and gamble and waste the tidy bit of money that your pa 'll be able to give you! I know what silly young girls' minds run on—they

want something that's all show and dash and glitter."

"I don't want to marry anybody, ma," said Miss Gill half-plaintively.

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Gill, slapping the butter with greater vigour than ever. "All young women wants to be married —it's human nature. The sooner a healthy girl like you's married the better for her. And now let's get on wi' this butter and get to polishin' the silver—we shall want every article of it out. I'll let Mestur Warwick see 'at I can mek' as good a show as Sarah Ellen Hancock can, any day i' the week."

It was past four o'clock when Mrs. Gill and her daughter had finished polishing the silver, dusting the best china, and laying the table in the dining-room; but at half-past five they were gowned in their best and seated in state in the parlour. Mrs. Gill's father had in his day been Mayor of St. Quentin's, and Mrs. Gill as a girl had mixed much in high society. She knew that it was not the proper thing to meet your guests at the door, but to receive them in your drawing-room; she also knew that a little chilliness of manner, a little haughtiness of tone, are things to be cultivated if you wish to make an impression.

And so when the new minister was duly ushered into Mrs. Gill's presence—and Miss Gill's—by a cherry-cheeked maid in a smart cap, he found himself greeted in quite a formal way, and instinctively pulled himself up to make his best bow.

"Mr. Warwick, I presume," said Mrs. Gill, who for the evening had assumed her company manners. "It gives me great pleasure to see you, Mr. Warwick, I'm sure. My daughter, Mr. Warwick; Maud Mary, my love, this is the young minister as has come to supply poor Mr. Robinson's place during his illness."

Warwick, quick to grasp the situation, bowed right and left and took the easy chair which Mrs. Gill pointed out to him with a condescending air. He took in his surroundings at a glance —the Hancocks' best parlour over again, except that the furniture here was upholstered in crimson rep instead of green, and that an oil-painting of Mrs. Gill's father, in his mayoral robes, occupied a place of honour on the walls. He glanced at the two ladies. Mrs. Gill sat in one attitude, pensively regarding the fire: Miss Gill sat in another, affecting deep interest in the contents of a green-and-gold book with very red edges.

"You will feel quite strange in this out-of-

the-way place, Mr. Warwick," observed Mrs. Gill with languid indifference.

"On the contrary, Mrs. Gill, I am beginning to feel quite at home," answered Warwick. "One could scarcely fail to be so when one experiences so much hearty hospitality. Mrs. Hancock and you are most kind to welcome me so warmly."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Gill. "Of course, you were at the Hancocks' last night, Mr. Warwick —yes. Oh, yes, very worthy persons is the Hancocks, them and us is great friends—very great friends. Of course, Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock is the mainstays, the pillars as you might term it, of the chapel."

"So I am given to understand," said Warwick.

"Yes," said Mrs. Gill, "what the chapel would do without Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock I cannot conceive, Mr. Robinson being but a delicate man. And, of course, Mrs. Hancock and me, we do our share. It's a considerable responsibility, Mr. Warwick. Of course Mrs. Hancock and me don't see everything in the same light, but we exercise Christian charity, Mr. Warwick—we exercise Christian charity."

"That," said Warwick gravely, "is an excellent thing to do."

Mrs. Gill sighed.

"This will be your first experience of a village congregation, Mr. Warwick?" she said inquiringly. "Ah, yes, you'll find a deal to try you. Mr. Robinson is a very delicate man, and delicate men is inclined to take things easy. Easily got round, too, is poor Mr. Robinson. However, one isn't called upon to say all that's in one's mind. A very nice, quiet girl, Ruth Hancock, don't you think, Mr. Warwick?"

"From what I have seen of her I should think Miss Hancock is a very nice girl, Mrs. Gill."

Mrs. Gill sighed again.

"It's a great pity that the Hancocks didn't see their way to sending poor Ruth to a proper finishing school," she said. "Of course she went to Miss Percher's, at St. Quentin's, there. But they took her away when she was sixteen. Now, Mr. Gill and me, we sent my daughter to the Misses Bowkerby's establishment for young ladies at York—a most genteel school that is, with the best governesses and professors. We kept her there until she was nineteen, Mr. Warwick. How long have you been home from Miss Bowkerby's, Maud Mary, love?"

"About nine months, ma," replied Miss Gill with a blush.

Warwick smiled at her.

"Weren't you glad to leave school?" he said, with a note of the comradeship of youth in his voice; "I was."

Miss Gill was puzzled. It was seldom, if ever, that she looked into herself—she was conscious now, under Warwick's challenging eye, that the last year or two at school had been rather nice. There had been some adventures—over the garden wall, and almost under the noses of the respectable Misses Bowkerby; and there had been young men to look at—and to look back—in the streets of the old cathedral city, and . . . .

"You're not quite sure," said Warwick, laughing. "Well, it's nice to like home, and it's nice to like school. Perhaps girls' schools are different from boys' schools. I didn't like school, didn't like it one bit."

"Dear-a-me!" exclaimed Mrs. Gill. "And you such a clever young man, according to Mestur Robinson. But of course you're a college gentleman, Mestur Warwick?"

"Ah, yes!" replied Warwick, looking at the fire as if he saw something in it. "But I was grown up then, you see—that was different."

"Every accomplishment that the Misses

Bowkerby could impart," said Mrs. Gill, returning to a favourite subject, "my daughter has acquired. She can paint flowers until you'd think they were natural, and her music-master said she was the best pupil he had ever had. One thing I strictly set my face against, Mestur Warwick, and that was dancing, which is a thing that I cannot approve of."

"Oh!" said Warwick. "Well now, you won't approve of me, then, Mrs. Gill, for I'm very fond of dancing. I don't dance now, because of late I've never had the chance, but I used to dance a great deal. It's a fine, healthy exercise for young people."

Before Mrs. Gill had found words wherein to express her astonishment that a minister should countenance such a profane amusement as dancing, the maid of the smart cap announced that tea was ready, and Warwick was conducted for the second time within twenty-four hours to a Yorkshire high tea, varying in little from that which Mrs. Hancock had given him, save that a couple of fine ducks had been sacrificed instead of a pair of fowls. Before these succulent and smoking victims Mr. Gill had already seated himself, armed with carving knife and fork; his ruddy face bore evidence of recent contact with soap and water, and his

hair was brushed back from his forehead and glistened with pomade. It had been a busy day with him, he informed Warwick; he had been here, there, and everywhere twice over, and had scarcely sat down since breakfast except to get a bit of dinner.

"My farm, you see, Mestur Warwick," he said, as he fell upon the ducks, "is a thowt bigger nor what Benjamin Hancock's is, and a bit wider spread about, like."

"Fifty-six acres bigger than the Manor Farm, Thomas Henry," said Mrs. Gill; "and very much better land, too!"

"Well now, well now!" said Mr. Gill good humouredly. "We'll none be to an odd acre or two, mamm-a. Of course, you know, Mestur Warwick," he went on, with a sly wink at his guest, "Benjamin will have it that he's the best farm and the best buildin's i' this neighbourhood, but when you've an hour or two to spare, sir, come down to the Lowlands, and I'll show you a bit of good farmin', and a few of matters in the way of agricultural machines and implements that not even Benjamin's gotten as yet. And now, the day's toil being over, we'll enjoy oursens wi' a good tea, and then we'll have a pipe or two, and happen a glass or two, and young miss here 'll

give us a tune on the pianny, and we'll be as happy as the day's been long."

Warwick stayed later at the Gills' than at the Hancocks'. He smoked tobacco with Mr. Gill, and drank a jug of Mrs. Gill's home-brewed ale. He heard Miss Gill perform several dashing pieces. But he did not play to her.

Elizabeth Wright was lighting his lamp when he returned home. She peered at him through the glass with speculative eyes.

"I sh'd think ye've had such bellyfuls at t' Gills' and t' Hancocks' this last two neets 'at ye'll want nowt to eat for a week, mestur," she said. "Howsummever, ye mun summon up a bit o' appetite for t' mornin'—I gotten two grand mutton chops for yer reverence' braikfast."

CHAPTER VII

THE GROVE OF CHESTNUTS

At the end of a fortnight Applemarney had taken Warwick to its bosom. He was young and handsome, kindly and energetic; he knew everybody in the place within a week of his arrival, and never forgot a face or a name; he was always busy, but never so much occupied that he could not find time for a chat or a conference; the old people worshipped him, and the children were quick to recognise a kindred spirit in him. Even the rigid and orthodox of the flock, who on first sight of him had felt uncertain as to the power of such a beardless youth to deliver the particular sort of message they delighted in, were obliged to confess that they could find no fault with him. Certainly, they said, he was not of the same type as Mr. Robinson, who inclined to scholasticism and dryness in the pulpit—Warwick talked rather than preached to them, talked to them of the common things of life,

as man should talk to man; it was not a conventional way, his, but he first impressed, then persuaded, finally dominated them. "He preaches to you as if he wor sittin' on one side o' t' hearth and you on t' other," said somebody. This was a new thing; the people began to wonder at its truthfulness and charm, just as they wondered at the energy which the newcomer threw into everything he did. He altered nothing and upset nothing of the machinery which had worked so smoothly under Mr. Robinson's placid rule, but he found out new opportunities of work for himself, and took full advantage of them. And none felt the results of this energy more than the poor and the sick.

"He's a reight 'un, is yon young man," said the landlord of the White Cow, discussing the new minister with some of his cronies. "He knows a thing or two, an' all. I wor never so taken aback i' my life as when he cam' stridin' thro' t' front door theer that afternoon o' t' day after he arrived. 'Good-day,' he says, 'are you the landlord?' 'I am sir,' says I. 'Well,' he says, shakkin' hands friendly like, 'have you any good old port wine?' he says. 'Why, sir,' I says, 'it's none oft that onnybody axes for port wine here,' I says; 'but it just so happens

that I have some port wine 'at owt to be extra good—I bowt three or four dozen at Sir Roger Crimpney's sale a year or two back, just for a sort of spekkylation, like, and it's down in a bin i' t' cellar—it's ne'er been touched.' 'Let's have a look at it,' he says, and wo'd go down wi' me to t' cellar. 'We'll tak' a bottle upstairs and try it,' he says, an' by gow, he knew how to decant it—he did so. 'That's all reight,' he says, when he'd tasted it. 'Five dozen on it, isn't theer?' he says. 'I'll buy the whole lot, and you must keep it here and I'll fetch a bottle or two as it's wanted.' And we agreed there and then on t' price, and he sent me a cheque for t' wine that varry night. But I know who sups t' port wine—he doesn't! he gies it to t' owd people; he goes round wi' the bottle and gies them a glass wi' his own hands. Why, look at yon theer Burton what brak' his leg! he's mendin' like a house on fire now 'at t' minister's started lookin' after him. It wor nowt but good support 'at t' man wanted—he'll be at his work again afore long. Aw! he's a reight un, is Mestur Warwick."

There were three people with whom Warwick was, because of his position, thrown into daily contact. On two days out of the six Joseph Wright was the village carrier; on the

other five he was the caretaker of the chapel and the minister's factotum. All days of the week Elizabeth Wright was the minister's housekeeper. On every day of the week the minister was bound to visit the school, and therefore to see the little schoolmistress. Now and then Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock came into the sphere of active things. But the queer old couple who lived under his roof and the girl who lived across the green were in his presence daily.

Warwick was not long in finding out that the Wrights were decided characters. Elizabeth was a martinet. She believed in Time and Place: the eight-day clock in the kitchen was not more regular than she. There were appointed days for dusting and sweeping; fixed hours for meals; a place for everything. Except when he was out of her sight she ruled Joseph with a rod of iron; if he came home from St. Quentin's with an extra glass inside his lean frame, she sorted him with a tongue that was rough enough to skin a bear. The cat, Roger, invariably rose to his feet whenever Elizabeth approached, not from fear, but in due respect. Tell her mind to anybody, on any matter, she would, without fear or favour—Warwick had not been three days in the house

when she gave him a lecture on the wickedness of entering the best parlour in muddy boots, a thing that Mr. Robinson had never dared to do. He took it in a meek spirit; the next time he came in from a country walk, he was met at the front door by Elizabeth, who, without a word, pointed to a chair in the hall, in front of which lay his slippers. He sat down obediently and removed the offending boots. Then he found that she had warmed the slippers, and recognised that beneath her dragon-like exterior there was a woman's heart.

Joseph Wright's life as caretaker of the chapel was one of infinite variety and not a little ease. Having occupied himself before breakfast in such light matters as cleaning boots and knives and carrying water and coals, he trifled away the morning in dusting the pews and the pulpit, sweeping out the floors, and pottering about the garden which separated the sacred edifice from the road. Now and then, Warwick, having occasion to go to the vestry for something or other, found him perched on a high stool at a desk, poring over the register—an ancient volume which went back to the times of persecution, and contained many entries in

the handwriting of the ejected minister of Fennery Brig.

"There's a deal o' grand readin' i' this owd book," Joseph would say on these occasions, pushing back his big spectacles on his forehead and showing a great disposition to chat. "It's what you might call the chronicles of the place, even in the time when Charles the Second wor on t' throne. Of course, my mind doesn't go back as far as that theer; but some day, parson, when you've nowt else to do, I'll tell ye the history of all 'at's happened i' my day. I've tell'd Mestur Robinson it many a time, and rare an' suited wi' it he wor an' all."

It was seldom that Warwick had any time for such diversions, but there were occasions when he smoked a pipe with Joseph in the kitchen garden at the back of the chapel, and listened with amusement to his quaint observations and reflections. He soon discovered that the caretaker had a curious trick of bestowing nick-names on the people with whom he came in contact—not always of a respectful nature. Thus he called Mrs. Gill, Madam Pomp; and Mrs. Hancock, Mother Pudding; an unfortunate woman in the village who was palpably knock-kneed he designated as Nance

Jowlty-legs; another who had lost her teeth he always spoke of as Henny Nutcracker; to Mr. Hancock and Mr. Gill he invariably referred as "t' Pillars of Society."

"What made you call Miss May 'Little Sunshine'?" asked Warwick, as he was helping Joseph to dig over a patch in the garden one evening.

Joseph straightened his back.

"Why, ye see, parson, it wor i' this way," he answered. "I wor varry bad last winter—eh, I wor that badly 'at I had to tak' to my bed. Shoo had me reight, had our Bet, at that time! Ye see, I couldn't do nowt, and shoo had me at her mercy. I had to mind my P's and Q's—I had so! Shoo wo'dn't give me nowt to eat until I'd said mi grace, and then I hed to say, 'If ye please, Elizabeth,' and 'No, thank you, Elizabeth,'—shoo made me hev' me comp'ny manners on reight while I was liggin theer i' bed. Eh, it wor dowly! Theer wor no comp'ny but Roger—t' owd cat used to come upstairs and peek on t' bed. Of course, Mestur Robinson used to come an' all, now and then, but it's a varry cowd chamber, is mine, an' it used to mak' his cough bad. Howsumiver, t' little schoolmistress, shoo got to hear 'at I wor badly, and shoo cam' to see me—an' it wor like

a bit o' sunshine an' all! And after that shoo used to come every day—twice a day—and sit and talk, and read pieces out o' t' paper, and tell tales, and laugh, and it did me a deal o' good—more nor t' doctor's physic did. An' that's how I cam' to call t' lass 'Little Sunshine!'"

"That was very good and kind of her," said Warwick thoughtfully. "It shows a kind nature."

"Aw, shoo's a good little lass," said Joseph heartily; "shoo's allus ready to go and see t' owd folk and t' poorly uns. Of course, shoo runs after t' young men a bit; but then, what can ye expect? Shoo's nobbut young, and young uns will be young uns. I wor a rare un for t' lasses when I wor a lad! it never did me no harm."

As he smoked his last pipe before he went to bed that night, Warwick pondered over this last remark of the caretaker's: "Shoo runs after t' young men a bit." Was the little schoolmistress, then, a flirt? He had been greatly interested in her when he first met her: her prettiness, her daintiness, the evidence of strong character in her—latent, perhaps, as yet, but there, indisputably there—had awakened in him a speculation, a curiosity, which no

woman had as yet aroused. It had been plain to him, and was becoming plainer as he became more familiar with the life of the village, that severely minded matrons like Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock did not approve of Miss May He was very well aware that the young schoolmistress was somewhat fond of purple and fine linen in the way of clothes and hats, but he also knew that she had a perfect taste and design in colour, and that that taste was very much beyond the comprehension of village folk. Remembering a sentence of Mr. Robinson's letter of general information, "You will find Miss May a thoroughly competent, capable schoolmistress—she has improved matters wonderfully since her coming, and I have every trust and confidence in her," and thinking of Joseph's dictum, "Young uns will be young uns—shoo's nobbut young," he preferred the kindly charity of the quaint old caretaker and the impression of the minister to the innuendoes of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock.

It was Warwick's duty to attend at the school every Saturday morning in order to go over the record of the week's work with Miss May and to sign the registers. Going there on the Saturday after his conversation

with Joseph in the kitchen-garden, he found her with the books spread out on her desk in readiness for him and she herself attired as if for some out-door excursion. He had a trick of noticing much without seeming to notice anything, and he saw that she was very smart, and was wearing a new hat, which, had it crowned Maud Mary Gill's pretty, expressionless face, would have looked loud and daring, but on her looked—fitting.

"There are only the usual entries, Mr. Warwick," she said.

Warwick glanced over the books and signed them. Some curious impulse, for which he could not account, led him to point to the schoolmistress's own signature at the foot of the various sheets.

"I have noticed," he said, "that you always sign yourself 'A. May.' What is your Christian name?"

She looked at him in some surprise, and the colour rose to her cheeks and her forehead. Warwick flushed too.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I just thought of it. It struck me as strange that you have never used it. I beg your pardon."

"No, no!" she said. "No, it isn't that. It's—well, it's such an uncommon name, that

—I don't like to use it here—because I think no one would understand. I—I've never even told it to Mr. Robinson. It's——"

Warwick suddenly realised, with a sudden new sense at his pulses, that she was going to tell him.

"Yes?" he said.

She laughed, looking away from him.

"It was a fancy of my mother's," she said, with a little catch in her throat. "She thought it was pretty."

Warwick waited a moment and then spoke softly.

"Your mother is—dead?" he said.

"Yes; long since. It was her fancy. She called me——"

"Yes?"

"April!"

Warwick repeated the name softly.

"April! April May!"

After a silence, she said:

"I shouldn't like any one here to know that. Because no one—no one but my mother ever called me by my name, and——"

She suddenly left him, and went away into the schoolhouse. Warwick, feeling that she would not come back, placed the books and papers in her desk and went homeward across

the green. And as he went he knew that something had sprung to life in him.

That afternoon, following a custom which he had set up for himself on Saturdays as a healthy preparation for the morrow's tasks, he went for a long walk into the country. He tramped for miles and miles over the level land, and, after getting tea at a wayside inn a long way from Applemarney, turned homeward in the first glow of the evening sunset. A short half-mile away from the village he suddenly felt tired and sat down to rest on a fallen tree beneath a grove of chestnuts. The purple and white of the ivory-surfaced blossoms lay dying round his feet.

As he sat there, every fibre of him instinct with the spirit of the oncoming twilight, he heard the rattle of wheels, the steady pacing of a horse's feet. In front of the grove of chestnuts ran a high road; at the back, a narrow lane led to the village. The vehicle was coming rapidly down the road. Warwick looked up, idly, to see it pass. As it came in sight, he saw that it was a dogcart, drawn by a fine bay mare, and that it had two occupants. One, a young, handsome man, florid of complexion, gay of air, smartly dressed in a suit of large plaid and wearing a rakish white billy-

cock a little to the side of his head; the other, April May.

The dogcart came to a standstill at the point where the high road and the by-lane met. The two occupants descended, and for a minute or two stood chatting and laughing. Then the man stooped; his lips touched the girl's cheek lightly. She drew back; the man climbed into the trap again with a laughing adieu—he drove off; she turned down the lane.

Warwick crossed the grove of chestnuts and struck into her path. She started at the sight of him, and the colour came swift and hot to her face.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "I have been for a long walk—miles and miles—and am just returning. We are going the same way."

They walked along the lane together in silence—he saw that her bosom was rising and falling with some unusual agitation.

"That," he said, after they had walked on for some distance—"that, I suppose, was—Mr. Beverley?"

She scarcely breathed her answer.

"Yes."

"Will you tell me something?" he said, suddenly facing her. "Please don't think me

impertinent or inquisitive. But are you engaged to him?"

"No!" she answered; "no!"

"Then," he asked, speaking very slowly, "why did you let him—kiss you? You will understand I could not help seeing it."

She walked on at his side some time without speaking. She had plucked a tendril of wild honeysuckle from the hedgerow and was now tearing it to shreds with fingers that trembled. At last she suddenly spoke.

"I—I didn't know that he was going to," she said. "It surprised me. And now—now you will have lost whatever respect you had for me!"

Warwick stopped and looked at her.

"No!" he said. "I'm not that sort of man. I was only wondering if you saw that some day *the* man—just the one man in all the world—would come along, and that you would like to feel that you'd kept even the—the little things for *him*?"

She gazed at him with dilating eyes, and suddenly she stepped back from him.

"Don't, don't!" she said. "Don't—don't look at me like that—it frightens me. It's as if—as if you were calling something out of me!"

Warwick's earnest scrutiny of her eyes remained fixed. He smiled.

"No," he said, "it's not that. I'm calling something—into you!"

She gazed at him for a moment longer, then suddenly turned away, and, passing through a gate close by, crossed the field beyond it and went towards the village.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. GILL INITIATES.

Left alone in the lane, his eyes following the slight figure as it hurried across the field, Warwick suddenly realised that he was in love with the girl he had just seen kissed by another man. He made no attempt to combat or evade this sudden realisation—he knew, beyond doubt, that it was of the essence of absolute truth. In one of those lightning flashes of clear vision which come to all men at some rare moments, he saw into his own soul. He loved her—had loved her from the very first. He knew now that there was something in her that he wanted—hungered for, craved, desired. He would have to have that something, or go starved, hungry, athirst all his life. It was burnt into him there and then that there was nothing in all the world that he so much wished for as for her, and that without her his life would never be complete.

He was, somehow, not at all surprised to receive a formal note from Miss May next morning begging to be excused from her duties at the chapel that Sunday: she pleaded a very bad headache. Warwick immediately foresaw a pitfall for himself—either Maud Mary Gill or Ruth Hancock was equally capable of playing the harmonium, but he knew that to ask one in preference to the other would give terrible offence to their respective mothers. With a guileful purpose he got the two girls into the vestry and put the difficulty before them, asking them if, between them, they would not help him out of it. They arranged, between themselves, that one should take the morning, the other the evening service. Warwick noticed that Ruth Hancock insisted that Maud Mary should make her first choice.

He paid his usual visit to the school next day with a certain amount of nervousness and trepidation. He was conscious that every visit thus paid was bringing him nearer some brink. Some quality within this one woman had melted into his veins: it was a subtle fragrance, a charm that seized and held him. Not even the dry formality of his official visits, the presence of the children, his reserve and her own, could prevail against that atmosphere

and fragrance; to be within the same room with her was to drink it, breathe it.

He saw at once that she had been unhappy. But after one quick, shy glance at him she kept her face averted and went on with her duties. She replied to his questions in brief fashion—it was evidently a relief to her when his visit terminated. All that week she was constrained and difficult of approach; it was as if a barrier had sprung up between them. On the Saturday afternoon when he went for his usual long walk he wondered if she were with Beverley—the thought raised some feeling in him which he did not endeavour to define. Returning in the early evening he called in at Henny Simpson's cottage to see how the old woman was—she was bedridden and at the mercy of a daughter-in-law who did as little for her as she could.

"Well, Henny," he said, "you haven't been all alone since morning, I hope?"

"No, and I haven't," answered Henny with cheerful alacrity. "Though I might ha' been for owt our Thomas' wife cares—shoo's none been near sin' she browt me me broth at one o'clock. No; I've had t' little schoolmistress to keep me comp'ny; shoo cam' in after shoo'd had her dinner, and shoo's nobbut just gone.

Shoo read a chapter to me, and the pieces out o' t' paper about this here war—an' a very bad job it seems to be an' all!—an' shoo sang me two or three songs, and shoo got some tea ready and went an' bowt some cakes, and we had a reight fashionable tea party on t' bedside here, and then shoo weshed t' pots and swept t' fireside up. So, I've been very comfortable, thank you!"

So she had not gone with Beverley that day! She came to chapel next day looking brighter than she had for the whole week. When he went to the school on the Monday she was more like herself in the days before the incident of the grove of chestnuts; but he noticed that her colour rose when he entered, and that her slight fingers trembled a little as she arranged some papers on her desk.

That week Mrs. Gill launched a vast enterprise upon the placid ocean of village life. With a view to the best dramatic effect she made a careful selection of time and place which would have done credit to a stage-manager.

The week-night service at the chapel was over and the select few who had attended it were about to depart into the June twilight. It was a well-known fact that only those who

were most deeply interested in the work of the chapel came to those week-night services; the lukewarm and the rank-and-file stayed at home. That evening some twenty or thirty of the more prominent members of the congregation were there—Mrs. Gill and Maud Mary represented the Lowlands, Mrs. Hancock and Ruth the Manor Farm. There were several other ladies of importance ranged here and there in the body of the chapel, and at least half a dozen men. In the background, near the main entrance, Joseph Wright, in his Sunday coat, was eating peppermint drops and wondering what his sister Bet had got for supper.

As is the custom with most congregations the people in the chapel had split up into groups and were indulging in seemly and hushed conversation before departing. Had any one noticed her particularly, they would have seen that Mrs. Gill, sitting at one end of her pew while Maud Mary was whispering to Ruth Hancock at the other end, was displaying signs of something like agitation. She untied and tied her bonnet strings; she drew on and drew off her gloves; she had recourse to her vinaigrette. Finally, after a preparatory cough, she said in a loud voice:

"Mr. Warwick!"

Warwick, who was speaking to a man at the foot of the pulpit steps, turned quickly and in some surprise.

"Yes, Mrs. Gill?" he said inquiringly.

"Mr. Warwick," said Mrs. Gill, "before we go there's a few words I could like to say to you and to such friends as is here to-night. It's on a little matter as'll perhaps interest all that has the interests of the chapel at heart, but of course nobody need stop to hear what I've got to say if they don't want to."

That everybody wanted very much to hear Mrs. Gill became instantly evident by the deep silence which followed her remarks. Warwick voiced the sentiment of the audience.

"I am sure we should all like to hear whatever it is that you have to say to us, Mrs. Gill," he said. "Pray proceed!"

"Well, Mr. Warwick," said Mrs. Gill, looking round about her as if to inform herself of the exact quality of her hearers, "what I have to say is this here: it's been borne in upon my mind for a good while back that it's high time this here chapel was done up. I'm referring to its inside, Mr. Warwick—the outside's good enough and weatherproof, so far as I know. But you've only got to look

round you to see that the inside needs a deal of repair and renovation, as they term it. It's naught no better than an old barn; there's never been naught done to it since it were built, and that's over and above forty year ago."

"Yes, theer has!" interjected Joseph Wright. "It's been colour-washed once—five-and-twenty years ago. I helped to do it!"

"That's a trifling circumstance of which there was no need to speak," said Mrs. Gill loftily; "and I'll thank you, Joseph Wright, not to address me, or contradict me, either, unless I address you, or there's reason for contradiction, which there will not be. As I was saying, Mestur Warwick, it's high time the inside of this here chapel should be restored; it's old-fashioned and out of date, and there's places of worship within ten miles of it that puts it to shame!"

Warwick looked round at the bare walls, the drab-coloured wood-work; he agreed with Mrs. Gill.

"Yes, you are quite right, Mrs. Gill," he said; "the chapel does need a few coats of paint."

"And something more than a few coats of paint, Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Gill with

emphasis. "It requires and must have a real thorough looking-to. That's what it wants."

"You have something to propose, Mrs. Gill?" asked Warwick, desirous of bringing Mrs. Gill to a point.

"No, Mestur Warwick, I've naught to propose," answered Mrs. Gill; "I've an announcement to make, which I hope it will be received with favour, as indeed it should by all concerned, though of course one never knows, for it's a mournful truth, but still a truth, that the more you do for some people the less you're thought of. However——"

Mrs. Hancock, who had been regarding Mrs. Gill with an expression made up of astonishment, perplexity, and anticipation, broke in upon her friend's speech at this point.

"Wi' all due respect to your sentiments, Mrs. Gill, which I'm sure all friends will agree does you honour," she said, "I do think as how we didn't ought to do nothing about the chappil while Mestur Robinson is away for his health, poor gentleman. After all, he's the minister, and has the final voice i' matters, an' . . . ."

"Begging your pardon, Mrs. Hancock," said Mrs. Gill in a velvet voice which made Warwick

think instinctively of certain feline propensities said to be discoverable in women—"begging your pardon, but if I may be allowed to say what I have to say, I think it 'll be seen that I have considered Mestur Robinson both before and behind, as they say. And what I have to say is this here: I've a very great deal of respect for Mestur Robinson, and so has my family, and I could like him when he comes back from the other side of the world, where of course, as we all know, he's journeyed to seek his health, I could like him, I say, to find the chapel beautified, if one may so describe it. Now, it's no doubt well known to all present, tho' perhaps not to you, Mestur Warwick, as is a stranger to the place, that my poor father left me a nice bit of money when he died at the beginning of the year. And of course, tho' it's a very gratifying thing to be remembered, me and my husband is not without means, and there's no need for me to put everything of that money by, as if we was dependent on it. And so—me and Gill having talked it over, and him being quite agreeable—it's my intention, Mestur Warwick and friends all, to undertake the repainting of this chapel at my own expense, so that Mestur Robinson, when he

comes home again, will have a pleasant surprise. The work shall be done thorough, and I'll pay every penny of what it costs."

In the midst of the hushed silence which followed upon the triumphant roll of Mrs. Gill's last clinching sentence, some of the few men who had listened to her with bated breath said heartily, "Hear! hear!" The silence melted into a buzz of general applause, in which, however, Mr. Warwick noticed, Mrs. Hancock did not join.

"That's a very kind and very handsome offer on your part, Mrs. Gill," he said. "I'm quite sure that everybody will agree with me on that point, and that Mr. Robinson will take it as a kindly compliment. The chapel certainly does need redecorating; I noticed that as soon as I came here."

One of the men, after some whispering with his fellows, rose to his feet. It was evident that he was moved to speak.

"I'm sure," he said, gazing fixedly at the ceiling—"I'm sure we've all heard our friend, Mrs. Gill, with pleasure and interest. Mrs. Gill's shown a reight spirit, and one that need must commend itself to all friends. I propose that Mrs. Gill's offer be accepted, with hearty thanks to her."

Another man was about to rise, but Mrs. Hancock forestalled him. Mrs. Gill had spoken sitting; Mrs. Hancock, more Juno-like than ever, rose to her feet, and threw back her bonnet-strings.

"I'm sure, Mestur Warwick," she said, fixing the minister with a piercing glance—"I'm sure there's no one could say aught other than that Mrs. Gill's offer is a very becomin' offer indeed, and a very generous one. But I really don't know if it owt to be accepted—leastways, not by them as is here to-night. I'm sure I can't say what Mestur Hancock, as of course is senior deacon, and next to th' minister i' power, would have to say to it; it might be that he'd have objections."

"Why, Mrs. Hancock, ma'am," said the man who had voiced the acceptance of Mrs. Gill's offer; "what objections could there be to a handsome proposal like that theer? It'll cost the congregation nowt at all. I'm sure we owt to feel very grateful to Mrs. Gill."

Mrs. Hancock shook her head.

"Theer may be objections as hasn't occurred to you, William Walker," she said. "For one thing, it doesn't seem right that all this repairin' should be done by just one member of the congregation. It owt to be shared in by all."

"Well, I can't see that theer, ma'am," said William Walker. "We'm not such a rich community as all that, and if one member as has t' brass, and can spare it, chooses to——"

"And there's another thing, Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Hancock, waving William Walker down—"theer's another thing: if Mrs. Gill undertakes this doing-up, Mrs. Gill 'll no doubt want to have the say in how it's to be done, 'cos them that pays for the piper generally calls for the tune, and——"

"If Mrs. Hancock 'll allow me," interrupted Mrs. Gill, "I may as well say that I've decided all that already with Mesheers Potter and Brusher, the decorators of St. Quentin's. The woodwork's to be done i' two shades of green—one dark and one light; the walls is to be painted, not washed, and the colour's to be green with a cockolate day-doe."

Mrs. Hancock nodded her head, as who should say "I told you so!"

"Well, I weern't deny," she said, "that green and cockolate'll go very well together, but of course they mightn't suit all tastes. I don't know what Mestur Hancock 'ud say to 'em—nor yet Mestur Robinson. There's some folk prefers one thing and some another. But of course, I know that if Mrs. Gill found the money,

Mrs. Gill 'ud naturally expect to have the full say i' th' matter. That is to be expected."

Mrs. Gill said nothing. She gazed sternly at the harmonium, whereat sat the schoolmistress listening to the debate with deep interest. There was a silence.

"The thing to do," said Warwick, suddenly, "is to call a church meeting. We will have it on Sunday night. Personally, I support Mrs. Gill's offer heartily."

Then the conclave broke up. Warwick, watching everything, noticed that Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock forgot to exchange the customary farewells.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. HANCOCK STEPS IN

Mrs. Hancock and her daughter went homewards for at any rate some part of the distance in silence. Ruth, in her own quiet way, was thinking of the effect which Mrs. Gill's scheme of redecoration would produce, and of the pleasure which Mr. Robinson would feel on finding his temple newly beautified; naturally unsuspicious, and somewhat unobservant, she did not notice that her mother was striding along at her side with a heightened colour in her cheeks and her head held very high in the air. Had she noticed these danger signals and understood them, she would not have added fresh fuel to the fire of Mrs. Hancock's indignation by making a very innocent remark.

"Wasn't that kind on Mrs. Gill's part, mother?—to offer to do all that for the chapel?" she said. "Won't Mr. Robinson be pleased?"

Mrs. Hancock turned her head and snorted indignantly.

"Kind!" she exclaimed. "Yes, I dessay! a deal o' kindness were intended. Kind! I wonder at you, Ruth Hancock! the idee of a dowter of mine bein' so silly as not to see through Kate Eliza Gill, wi' her nasty, underhand ways! Kind! The only kindness as Kate Eliza Gill thinks of is kindness to herself, my gel!"

Ruth's large eyes filled with wonder. She looked at her mother as if she were endeavouring to grasp that worthy woman's meaning.

"Why, mother," she said, "wouldn't Mrs. Gill be doing a kindness in spending her money on the chapel? It does need painting and decorating."

"An' who's Kate Eliza Gill, I wonder, to put herself forward to clean and paint the chappil as if she was a duke or one o' these millionaires 'at uses bank-notes to light their pipes wi'?" demanded Mrs. Hancock. "If you wasn't the simple-natured gel that you are, Ruth Hancock, you'd see through Kate Eliza and her proppysitions. It's naught but a wicked settin' of herself up to be something grander than her neighbours—

that's what it is. Her and her father's money! I wonder if she thinks nobody but herself has fathers wi' a bit o' money? An' sure I am that th' owd fellow left none so much, skinflint and cheeseparer as he was well known to be. They were allays near wi' their money, were his lot. Her poor father's legacy, indeed! An' whatever your pa will say to such a proposal I'm sure I don't know. It'll be fair upsettin' to him, as is senior deacon and in greater authority nor what Thomas Henry Gill has ever been."

Mr. Hancock, all blissfully unconscious of the fateful news which was being brought to him, was solacing himself in the parlour after the fashion of middle-aged gentlemen who have been out and about all day on the land; that is to say, he had a pipe in his mouth, a glass in his hand, and the *Yorkshire Post* on his knee. Although it was now drawing near to the middle of spring, there was a bright fire in the grate before which Mr. Hancock sat—it communicated a glow of cheerfulness to his usually solemn countenance. He gazed benevolently, even affectionately, upon his wife and daughter as they entered the parlour, and nodded his head in friendly acknowledgment of their presence.

"So you've got back again, ladies," he observed genially. "I were just beginning to think that you were a bit latish, like Been kept a bit longer than usual, I expect!"

"Yes, we have been kept longer nor what is usual, Benjamin Hancock!" replied the lady of the house. "And for a very nice business, too, upon my word! Whatever airs and graces some folk will give themselves next I'm sure I'm unable to say—I really am!"

Thereat, Mrs. Hancock, with all the dignity of a tragedy queen, left the room for the purpose of taking off her bonnet and mantle, leaving Mr. Hancock open-mouthed with astonishment and curiosity. His face slowly turned from the door through which his wife had disappeared towards his daughter, who was standing in a thoughtful attitude on the other side of the hearth.

"What's up with your ma, Ruth?" inquired Mr. Hancock.

Ruth shook her head.

"I don't quite understand it, father," she replied; "but I think Mrs. Gill has vexed her."

Mr. Hancock's eyes and mouth became normal.

"Aw!" he said. "Well, of course, of course! Your ma and Mrs. Gill is sich old and tried friends that to vex each other now and then comes natural to both of 'em. An' what has Kate Eliza Gill been doin' this time?"

"Mrs. Gill," replied Ruth, "has offered to repaint and decorate the chapel throughout, all at her own expense. She made the offer to-night after the service was over. It seems that her father has left her some money, and she said she would like to spend some of it in that way."

Mr. Hancock rose up in his chair and gazed at his daughter with dilating eyes. He turned from her to look all around the room, as though he wanted to make sure of himself; finding that he was really awake and in his right mind, he seized his tumbler and drank off its contents at one gulp.

"Well, my word!" he said. "Kate Eliza Gill purposing to spend her father's bit o' money on what you might term pure vanity! Why, the owd fellow would turn in his grave if he heard of it—he was the nearest tradesman in St. Quentin's in his time. Deary me! Well, it'll cost Mrs. Gill every penny of a hundred pound if it's done right. But, of

course, it was said that her father left her a matter of two or three thousand, and if she likes to spend her brass in that way, why, I'm sure I see no objection."

Mrs. Hancock, still visibly indignant, had returned to the parlour just in time to hear her husband's last words. She turned upon him with a consuming indignation.

"An' I wonder 'at you can sit in that theer easy chair, Benjamin Hancock, and say such things in the presence of your own dowter and your own lawful wedded wife as has been insulted and made light of this night as she never was afore!" she said. "You'd ought to be ashamed o' yourself—you, as is senior deacon o' the chappil an' gretter in authority nor what Thomas Henry Gill ever was or ever will be. No objection, indeed! when you know theer's a great many objections."

"Why, my lass, why?" said her husband, feebly. "I'm sure I don't see any serious objection. If Mistress Gill chooses to spend her brass in that way, why shouldn't she? She'll pay, and we shall have the benefit. Th' old place can do very well wi' a few coats o' paint."

Mrs. Hancock scaled the topmost heights of indignation. Her ample bosom rose in

tumult, her fine hazel eyes flashed fire; she looked down from her superior height upon her lord and master as if he had been a slave.

"An' that's what you say, is it, Benjamin Hancock, a sittin' there an' takin' your pleasure like a lord wi' your pipe and your glass, and allowing your lawful wife to be used as a doormat for other folk to wipe their feet on!" she burst out. "I wonder you can look your own dowter i' th' face! We shall have the benefit, shall we? An' do you think 'at I'm goin' to submit to sit in a green chappil wi' a cockolate day-doe 'at's been paid for by Kate Eliza Gill? Do you, I say, Benjamin Hancock —do you, I say, expect your lawful wife to do such a thing?"

"Nay, nay, my lass, I expect naught but what's reasonable," said Mr. Hancock, in accents of would-be propitiation.

"An' do you call it reasonable 'at I should sit i' that pew alongside o' Kate Eliza Gill and her fam'ly, knowin' 'at the very paint I was sitting on was paid for by her?" demanded Mrs. Hancock. "Do you call it reasonable 'at I should join in public worship, to sing hymns, and hear sermons, under such degradin' circumstances as what them would

be? 'Cause if you do, Benjamin Hancock, I don't, and I mun insist 'at you put your foot down an' stop it—so theer!"

Mr. Hancock shook his head, and stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Aye, aye, my lass!" he said. "That's all very well, but, you see, I haven't the power to put my foot down, however much I might want to. I'm only one man amongst three. If the minister and Thomas Henry Gill agrees to this here proposal I can't gainsay them. I should be in what in Parliamentary circles they term the minority, ye see, my lass."

Mrs. Hancock planted her knuckles on her plump hips and glared at her husband.

"And do you mean to tell me, Benjamin Hancock, you as is senior deacon," she began "Do you mean——"

Mr. Hancock broke in unceremoniously.

"Now, then," he said, speaking with authority, "don't you make no mistake, missis. The senior deacon's no more authority than the junior deacon when it comes to votin' power. If the minister for the time being and one of the deacons decides on a certain policy, t' other deacon can do naught—he's out-voted. If Mestur Warwick, as minister for t' time being,

and Thomas Henry Gill decides to do this, that, or t' other, I can't hinder 'em. That's accordin' to what you might term the constitution—it's so laid down in the trust-deed of the chapel."

After a period of silence, broken only by some very hard breathing on the part of Mrs. Hancock, that lady said:

"An' so Kate Eliza Gill can paint that theer chappil green and put a cockolate day-doe round it?"

Mr. Hancock waved his hands abroad.

"If the minister and the deacons approves," he said, "Kate Eliza Gill can paint t' chapel sky-blue and hev a rainbow over the pulpit. That's the truth!"

Mrs. Hancock drew a few more very deep breaths. She nodded her head two or three times at nobody and nothing.

"Very good," she said. "But theer's no game but what more nor one can play at it, and I daresay I can make as good a player as Kate Eliza Gill. An' now, then, Ruth Hancock, what are you standin' theer for, talking, when you know it's past supper time? Go and ask them gels why they don't bring the supper-tray in? I'm sure your pa's starvin' for his sandwiches, and a little something'll none hurt

me after all the grief and pain as I've passed through this night. But, as I've already said, and say it I will again, there's no game but what more nor one can play at. Kate Eliza Gill's not the only woman in the world as happens to have a bit o' money; I've got money as well as Kate Eliza Gill, and it so happens as it's mine, as you, Benjamin Hancock, are well aweer. And happen I know what to do wi' money as well as Thomas Henry Gill's wife does."

During the next two or three days Mrs. Hancock's manner was dark and full of mystery. She went about the house in a fashion that suggested that she was very deep in thought. Now and then she said "Yes, indeed—we shall see!" in a tone of great conviction, but of no reference to any matter then in hand; now and then, over her sewing or her knitting or her butter-making, she nodded her head and smiled a good deal. Her husband and daughter found her very absent-minded at this period, and for once in a way her tongue had an unusual cessation from activity.

On the eventful Sunday, whereon the meeting to consider Mrs. Gill's proposal had been convened, Mrs. Hancock trod the aisles of the chapel with the air of an heroic martyr; there

was a grand spirit in her face and she beamed sweetly on every one, and upon no one so kindly as upon Mrs. Gill.

In the informal meeting which followed upon the regular service Mrs. Gill's proposal to renovate the interior of the chapel at her own cost was unanimously adopted. Nay, the definite proposal for its acceptance was put forward by Mr. Hancock, and Mrs. Hancock was the first to hold up her hand in token of agreement. Warm thanks were raised to Mrs. Gill; much incense was burnt under Mrs. Gill's nose; Mrs. Gill snuffed it up and absorbed it with equanimity. She kept an eye on Mrs. Hancock during this moment of triumph; it was when the triumph was at its height that Mrs. Hancock, a fine figure of a British matron, rose to—minimise it.

"Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Hancock, her gloved fingers resting on the ledge of the pew, her eyes sweeping the assembly—"Mestur Warwick, and friends. There's a few words I would like to say."

Amidst the intense silence of suddenly aroused curiosity Warwick asked Mrs. Hancock to proceed. Mrs. Hancock smiled loftily upon the attentive faces—their curiosity pleased her. Her own husband sat open-mouthed at her

side, staring at her; Ruth, on the other side, blushed and cast down her eyes. And Mrs. Gill, watching her dear friend closely, realised with feminine prescience that Mrs. Hancock was up to something!

"Mestur Warwick and friends all," repeated Mrs. Hancock, "I'm sure we all of us feel greatly obliged to our old fellow-member, Mrs. Gill, for her kindness. Of course, Mrs. Gill and her fam'ly has not lived in the place as long as some others as could be named if need were, but all good deeds, of course, deserves credit. It really were high time 'at t' chappil were painted and done up, and I think 'at green and cockolate 'll look very well. However, Mestur Warwick, a few coats o' paint isn't all that this here chappil wants—it wants a lot more nor that theer, though that's a useful start. But when Mrs. Gill's done wi' the paintin' and decoratin', there'll still be a great deal to do. Indeed, i' my opinion, the new paint 'll make the rest o' th' place look shabbier nor ever."

A murmur of voices—a shuffling of feet—Mrs. Hancock was getting hold of her audience.

"Not that that's any reason at all why Mrs. Gill shouldn't spend her money in doin' a bit

o' paintin' if she's so minded," she continued with a bland smile upon Mrs. Gill; "but, as I say, the paintin' will only be makin' a start, as it weer. There's a lot to be done, as I've pointed out, and am goin' to point out. Now, for example, Mestur Warwick, theer's the pulpit. I don't believe that theer pulpit's safe; it would never surprise me if t' minister were to disappear in it like one o' them jack-in-the-boxes what the childer plays wi'. I once did go up into it, and I'm sure it shook under my feet."

"It does shake," said Joseph Wright. "It's dry rot 'at's gotten into it. Mistress Hancock's i' the reight."

"Then theer's the question of carpetin'," continued Mrs. Hancock. "Of course, if you have bran'-new green walls wi' a cockolate day-doe, you'll not want bare floors to walk on. The aisles'll have to be properly carpeted, and so will this here space around the pulpit and the harmonium. And talkin' of harmoniums reminds me, Mestur Warwick, that this here instryment has done its best work. Its high time we had an organ, and——"

One of the male members of the congregation rose to his feet. He smiled deprecatingly.

"I'm sure it's very reight, is all 'at Mrs.

Hancock's pointin' out," he said; "but I don't see the use of it when it's well known 'at we're a poor community, like, and it's only like a settin' a feast afore a man 'at can't get at it to tell us o' what——"

"An' I'll thank you to give your opinion when you're asked for it, James Boscow!" said Mrs. Hancock. "The idee o' your interruptin' me! But since I have been interrupted, Mestur Warwick, and to cut a long story short, as they say, I desire to mek' it known that since our good friend and feller-member, Mrs. Gill, has seen good to undertake the decoration of the chappil at her own cost, it is my intention to present the chappil wi' a new pulpit, with proper lamps and a red cushion with gold tassels for the Good Book to lie on; to buy a new American organ to replace the harmonium, and to provide proper carpeting for the aisles and the flooring. An' I hope," concluded Mrs. Hancock, who for some minutes had been fanning herself vigorously with her handkerchief, "I hope 'at my offer will be accepted in the Christian sperrit in which it's made."

That night it was Mrs. Gill who left the chapel in a state of high indignation. She had desired to have all the glory, all the incense,

all the praise, and—lo—Mrs. Hancock had robbed her of at least one-half of all three! She was no longer the great and only benefactress—Mrs. Hancock had been enthroned at her side.

CHAPTER X

THE MILESTONE

In village communities the immediate local event is of much more importance than any national or world-affecting event could ever be under any circumstances. A village is its own world; its folk see things as they are, close to; anything beyond the parish boundaries they see as from very far away. Having for the most part never travelled more than an hour's journey from their native soil they find it hard to realise that an earthquake in San Francisco, a big fire in London, an epoch-making battle in South Africa, is a real thing —it is, rather, a shadowy thing heard of through those mysterious affairs, the newspapers, which are matters that no truly rustic mind ever can understand. A palpably mythical story from the older books of Holy Writ will be accepted by such minds with implicit faith, because they receive it direct

from the copy of the Good Book which reposes in state on a velvet cushion in the pulpit of the village chapel or on the lectern of the village church; they see the book, and know its weightiness in more than one sense—it is a tangible, solid, respectable Fact. But the most accurate account, taken from the *Times* itself, of any stupendous event which occurred but yesterday ten thousand miles away, produces little if any effect. To begin with, it is inconceivable that accurate news should travel so far in such a short time; to end with, it is impossible to imagine that anything has an existence so far away. Around this beginning and ending is the fine atmosphere of the fact that this thing, whatever it may be, fire, earthquake, slaughter of man by man, is not on the doorstep. In fine, it is out of the rustic world.

And so Applemarney was naturally more interested in the designs of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock upon the meek humility of the sober-garmented little chapel than in the carving out of a new slice of empire in this corner of the world, or the construction of a Grand Trunk Railway in that. When, upon a certain Sunday morning the young minister announced that from that time forward the services would be held in the

schoolroom across the green instead of in the chapel, Applemarney became as excited as children are who hear that a circus or a menagerie is coming to town. It could scarcely sleep that night for thoughts of what was about to happen on the morrow. On the morrow it woke early to see what was to be seen. Folk who lived in close proximity to the chapel were envied because all day they would be able to see comings and goings. Theirs it was, without a hindrance, to behold the arrival of a small army of painters, plasterers, whitewashers, who wore white linen coats and brought carts full of pots and cans and brushes, and began to tumble over each other in the chapel in depositing all these things therein, and who were always hard at work, except when they were resting a little in the cool shades of the White Cow. Every inhabitant of the village made it his or her business to wander in the direction of the chapel and to find great delight in peeping in through the open doors at the scaffolding, the ladders, the hangings of brown holland, the splashes of paint, the splashes of whitewash —it was interesting to them as the building of St. Paul's must have been to the good citizens of Cheapside in the days which followed the

Great Fire. Naturally it was to no one so interesting as to Mrs. Gill. Not a day passed whereon she did not visit the scene of operations; not a visit did she pay without impressing upon the foreman painter that he must see that this was done and that was not done. Now and then—usually at least once a day—Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock, each with his hands under the tails of his coat, looked in to give countenance and tone to the proceedings and to throw out a suggestion or two as to where slight improvements might be made. And sometimes came Mrs. Hancock, whose objects were shamefully and cheerfully ulterior, in that she chiefly wished to know when all the mess and muck would be over and she would be free to superintend the laying down of the new carpets, the setting up of the new pulpit, and the placing in position of the American organ.

The one person whom all this chop-and-change affected most seriously was Joseph Wright. His ecclesiastical occupation was gone. For the greater part of the week all the year round, for many long years, he had found his day's pursuits in and about the chapel. He could spend half a forenoon in dusting the pulpit and the rest in putting the

hymn-books straight in the pews; sometimes he found occasion to nail down a loose board or to sew up a hole in a hassock or a cushion—such events provided him with occupation for a whole day. But now, save for the days he went into St. Quentin's with his carrier's cart, Joseph was an idle man. He could not go on cleaning knives and boots, carrying coals, and drawing water all day long, and there was next to nothing to do in the garden, for everything was coming up, and he was too good a gardener to have let weeds get ahead of him. Hours hung heavy on his hands, and Joseph was marked down by the devil.

Elizabeth Wright burst into Warwick's study one afternoon as he sat there reading and smoking—burst in with that fine disregard of ceremony which betrays urgency and determination. Her gaunt figure quivered with anger; the horn-like points of the red cotton handkerchief turban seemed to bristle with wrath. She attacked Warwick with characteristic straightforwardness.

"Now, then, this here's gotten to stop, Mestur Warwick!" she burst out. "It's all very well for ye, after fillin' yer belly wi' a good, toothsome dinner to sit theer i' yer easy chair, readin' yer newspaper and smokin' yer pipe

when theer's work to be done 'at ye owt to do. I'm one o' them 'at says what they think, and I should say what I thowt to Mestur Robi'son hisself, if he wor here, which he isn't, or to t' Poäp o' Rome, eyther, if I could get at him. I say ye'll ha' to be up an' doin' summut!"

Warwick dropped the newspaper and stared at the apparition with something of fear.

"What is the matter, Elizabeth?" he asked. "What—what have I done?"

Elizabeth shook the horns of her turban.

"It's not what ye've done," she said, "but what ye owt to be doin'. It's ye'er duty to look after t' fowks' souls, to see 'at t' Owd Lad dosen't get howd on 'em. But he will, if he's none watched—he'll get howd on him reight enough, will t' Owd Lad!"

"Get hold of whom?" inquired Warwick, quite bewildered.

"Why, he'll get howd o' our Joä! Hevn't ye seen 'at our Joä's goin' on t' rant ageeän? He's ower theer now, this varry minute, 'at t' White Cow, suppin' wi' some o' these painter and whiteweshin' fellers—a parcel o' good-for-nowts! He's nowt to do now 'at t' chappil's i' all this here muck, an' t' chaps axes him to go an' sup wi' 'em, and off he goes; wheer

theer's a drop o' drink i' t' case he's as bad as a soft young lass wheer theer's a man about. He's been over to t' Cow three times already to-day, and he wor soft when he wor atein' his dinner. I sorted him reight weel, but when he's gotten a drop o' drink into him he cares nowt for what I say—I'm nowt but a poor, downtrodden woman at them times!" concluded Elizabeth, raising one corner of her apron and betraying a very feminine intention of dissolving in tears.

Warwick put down his pipe and rose. He patted Elizabeth's skinny arm.

"Never mind, Elizabeth, never mind!" he said; "I'll look after Joseph in future. He only wants a guiding hand and something to do. Now I'll go and fetch him away from the Cow."

He took his hat and stick and went across the green to the village inn. There, in a comfortable corner of the kitchen, hob-and-nobbing with two of the painters, sat Joseph, deep in reminiscence and in past history. There was a churchwarden pipe in his mouth, and a mug of ale ready to his hand, and his face shone.

Warwick looked over the partition which screened these three companions and nodded

genially to them. Joseph stared with all his eyes.

"Hallo, Joseph," said Warwick, "enjoying yourself, eh! I was just looking for you. Take your time."

In another moment Joseph had joined him outside the inn.

"I was thinking of walking to Fennery Brig, to look over the church," said Warwick. "You had better come with me. You know all about it."

Joseph swelled out with pride. He borrowed a stout stick from the landlord of the White Cow, and entered upon the duties of cicerone by informing Warwick that he could take him to Fennery Brig church by a way which nobody but himself was cognisant of. The boon companions and the ale-mugs vanished from his mind; into it, instead, came a great flood of folk-lore and folk-talk. He returned home to Elizabeth in such a frame of good behaviour that she made him a fatty-cake for his supper.

Next morning Warwick found Joseph a job that would occupy all his spare time. The old man could write a very clear, if somewhat crabbed hand, and he had read and re-read the chapel register so much that he was fully

conversant with its most interesting contents. Warwick provided him with a manuscript book and set him to copying; thenceforward Joseph became what Elizabeth called a "scholard," and set up a writing-table, in the quietest corner of the kitchen, whereat he laboured many hours a day.

The renovation of the chapel occasioned Warwick himself very little concern. Apart from a sense of gratification that the regular minister would come back to find his place of worship beautified and put in order, he had scarcely more than a passing interest in the affair, and he was secretly and immensely conscious of a feeling that desire of self-aggrandisement had led both Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock to undertake the renovation. He had been quick to note the signs of chagrin, of disappointment, even of anger, when Mrs. Hancock made the fatal announcement which robbed Mrs. Gill of half her glory; he had seen, too, the complacency on Mrs. Hancock's face when her offer was received with the incense of unanimous approval. He knew very well that there was no need for him to superintend or even to criticise the work as it went on—Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock, with their respective husbands, would do that wil-

lingly and effectively. And so, beyond taking an occasional glance at them, he left the workmen alone.

He was at that time becoming more and more conscious that he was in love with the little schoolmistress. He had never been in love before, and he found it difficult to analyse his feelings. Ere the knowledge of his love had been with him many days he took a wise man's course and gave up attempting to analyse it—it became sufficient to feel it. He was conscious of feeling it as he approached the schoolmistress every day for his formal visit: still more conscious of it when he found himself in her presence. There was a call in her that appealed to him in all ways: it grew stronger and deeper as the days went on. Before long he had come to recognise that the best hour of his day was that which he spent under the roof of the schoolhouse, in spite of the fact that they never exchanged a word which was not on business matters relating to the school or the children. He tried to think as he sat alone one evening of all the possibilities and probabilities of the matter. He had gained some little notion of her history—from herself, from Joseph Wright, from a little schedule of information left him by Mr.

Robinson. She was an orphan, the only child of parents who had lived in the South of England, and she seemed to have few friends or relations—he gathered that since she had earned her own living as a teacher she had usually spent her holidays where her work lay; that she was a sound and conscientious teacher, putting her heart into her work and taking great pains with her pupils, he quickly assured himself—the school was in a state of great efficiency and she made the most of the very raw material which came into her hands. Nor did it take him long to find out that she was kind of heart—the sick folk and the old folk praised her without stint, and the ailing children cried for her presence. Yet in the eyes of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock she was a forward young madam, and even Joseph Wright, with all his adoration of her, had said that no doubt she ran after the young men. And had not he himself seen a young man kiss her?

"But even that," said Warwick, "even that does not alter the fact; the fact is—there."

On the fourth Saturday after the scene in the grove of chestnuts, Warwick, who had just procured a new bicycle from London,

went out for a ride instead of for his usual Saturday excursion on foot. He had been a keen cyclist in earlier days, and the joy of being on a good machine again, and on firm-surfaced, level roads, led him so far afield that it was nearly twilight when he came within view of the tall poplars which marked the whereabouts of Applemarney. And just as they tapered up against the purpling sky he turned a corner into the highway which led to St. Quentin's, and came face to face with April May.

There was an old milestone at this point—a grey stone which had gradually slanted towards the ground; she was leaning against it, gazing thoughtfully at a bunch of June roses which she had plucked from the hedgerows. At the sudden sound of Warwick's wheels she looked up, and a wave of hot colour swept across her face. Like a sudden illumination there came to him the certainty that her thoughts had been of him, and for the next few moments he felt like a man in a dream. Then he found himself talking to her about his new bicycle, explaining its beauties and its points as enthusiastically as a schoolboy, till, looking at her, he saw that she was smiling at him He laughed.

"Ah!" he said; "but you see, I have been so fond of cycling, and for a whole year I have not had the chance to ride about country lanes. Why do you not ride? Get a machine and I will teach you; it is not difficult, and it would do you good."

"It is very kind of you," she said; "but I am afraid I must confine myself to walking, so far as exercise goes."

"And yet—you love to be out so much."

"Yes," she said.

There was a strange silence between them for some moments. When Warwick spoke again they were walking slowly down the highway in the direction of the village.

"You have not been out riding for the last three Saturdays," he said in a low voice.

"No."

"I know you have not, because I know where you have been, each Saturday. It is good of you to give your weekly holiday—your one day—to the old people, but you ought to be out."

To this she made no answer.

"Don't think me—inquisitive," he went on presently. "But will you tell me why you haven't been driving with Mr. Beverley again?"

For a time she kept silence; at last she turned and looked at him with candid eyes.

"Because I did not wish to. That may seem a very poor excuse, but indeed it is the truth. I can't say—for I don't know—why it is the truth, but it is the truth. I did not wish to."

Then Warwick became silent. She presently spoke again.

"He wrote to ask me to go driving with him each week, and I made an excuse each time. It—it has troubled me, because I suppose I really ought to have said what was in my mind—that I did not wish to go—that—that there was no desire to go."

"And yet you used to enjoy these drives?"

"Yes; a great deal. But——"

The sound of a horse and trap, driven at a fast pace, came along the highway behind them. Warwick moved his machine to the side of the road; the girl moved with him. In another minute the horse and trap were up to them, had flashed past. Its occupant looked down on them, raised a white hat to them. Warwick glanced at the girl: she had turned very pale, but her face was composed, her eyes steady.

"That was Beverley, was it not?" said Warwick.

She made no answer beyond a slight inclination of her head. Without further words they walked together to the boundary of the village and parted.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST HALF OF AN OLD PROVERB

When the young minister and the little schoolmistress parted it was already dusk and half the village was asleep. Her slight figure, slipping away from him into the vague shadows, was quickly lost to view: it seemed to him as if she had vanished like a spirit. Something within him prompted him to call her back, to follow her; instead of obeying this instinct he went homeward, stabled his bicycle, and entered the house. Looking mechanically at his watch he saw that it was not yet nine o'clock. There was supper set out on the table for him—usually, when he came in from his Saturday afternoon excursions, he was sharp-set for it: on this night he felt that the first mouthful would nauseate him, that his appetite, for some reason, had been spoiled. He began, slowly, to recognise what it was that had spoilt it, what it was that had set up a certain fever in

his blood. Recognising this, he was again tempted to follow the girl whom he had just left, and he turned in the direction of the door, only to be confronted by the unlovely presence of Elizabeth Wright, who came in with a dish which she had been keeping hot at the kitchen fire. He accepted Elizabeth as a finger-post; when she had gone, he sat down and forced himself to eat and drink.

The little schoolmistress, on her part, went slowly across the darkening green in the direction of the schoolhouse. She saw the light burning in her own window; the old woman who kept house for her would, she knew, already have gone to bed; she herself had no inclination to sleep, and for some reason which she did not even attempt to define she felt as though she could not breathe within doors. There was a change, an unfamiliar sensation at her heart, a new tide welling up at the innermost spring: she wanted to be out in the night, under the darkness, with nothing but the sleeping land, the friendly silence, the starlight, the whispering trees for company. Something in all those natural influences was sympathetic—motherlike. Within four walls—even her own four

walls, surrounded by such household-gods as she possessed—she would feel desolate and alone. The night and the earth spoke more of—home.

Coming to the giant oak in the middle of the green, now clad in all the freshness of its new garments, she paused, laying her hand on its gnarled trunk as if she were laying it on the arm of some kind and trusted friend. There was that in its rugged strength, its rock-like immovableness which cheered and encouraged her: in a half-recognising way she began to realise how much greater in some things the inanimate is than the animate. Men and women had come and gone around that mighty father and patriarch of trees for generations, centuries; they were dust and ashes in the earth; it was still there, and still green, creating a new youth for itself as each successive spring came round.

There was a rustic seat beneath the giant oak; she sat down upon it and leaned her head against the mighty trunk. Overhead she heard the creaking of the topmost branches, and the rustling of the new leaves, which were now thickening day by day. The green lay all around—a stretch of vast, indefinite

darkness, fringed by the almost formless shapes of the houses and buildings which surrounded it. In some of the houses a feeble ray of light still lingered; she recognised the chapel-house because of the more powerful lamp which it possessed; the White Cow was distinct from its neighbouring dwellings because of its red blinds. But most of the people living around the green had gone to bed; they were early to wake and early to sleep, these Applemarney folk, winter and summer: scarcely one of the cottages had a light in its window. Far away, however, in the most remote corner of the green, she saw the flickering, scarcely perceptible glint of a rushlight in old Henny Simpson's cottage. She had been with the old woman all that afternoon, "livening" her up; she wondered now if the old lady were lying awake, watching the spark of light which was nearly as feeble as the thread of her own nearly worn-out life.

Rising at last from her seat beneath the old oak, April went slowly across the green in the direction of the schoolhouse. She passed Joseph Wright's horse—a meditative animal which allowed her to pat its neck and followed her disappearance into the dusk with eyes

which betrayed no feeling. In the silence she heard him begin cropping the grass again. Then, nearing the edge of the green in front of the schoolhouse, she heard a more pronounced sound—some one was pacing up and down the road. A figure passed and re-passed the tiny stream of light which came from her own window—the figure of a man. In another moment she had reached the gate of the schoolhouse garden to find Beverley awaiting her.

April showed no sign of surprise or of agitation. Out of sheer force of habit she gave him her hand, glancing at him in the stream of light which glinted on themselves and on the glossy-leaved holly-bushes at the gate. She saw that his face looked anxious and troubled. He held her hand tightly, but there was no formal greeting between them.

"I—I want to speak to you," he said. "I had to come to Hancock's to-night—there's one of his best horses very bad, and after I'd attended to it I came round here to see if I could see anything of you. Can't we walk about the green for a while?"

Without audible answer she turned and walked at his side in the direction from which

she had just come. The darkness swallowed them up.

"Look here," said Beverley abruptly, after they had walked a little distance in silence, "why wouldn't you meet me these last three Saturdays?"

They had walked still farther before she replied to his question.

"You would wish me to tell you the truth?"

"I, why, of course! I'm not the sort that wants anybody to tell lies. I never cared for that sort of thing myself in either man or woman—it's not my game, that! Of course, I'd wish you to tell me the truth."

"Well, because I did not wish to meet you."

Beverley drew a long breath. If she could have seen what he was doing in the darkness, she would have known that he had plunged his hands into the pockets of his riding breeches and was nervously turning over and occasionally gripping the keys and coins which lay there. He was also biting his lips and his moustache.

"Yes—I understand that," he said, jerkily. "I—perhaps I'm a bit slow at some things, but you—I understood. Only, you see, I wanted

to know—why? Because—you used to like to go, didn't you?"

She whispered, rather than spoke, her answer:

"Yes."

Beverley sighed very deeply.

"They say there's always a cause for everything," he said. "There must be a cause for this—for your alteration. I thought we were—were getting on so well together—such good friends."

She made no answer: it seemed to her that it was impossible to her to make one. Beverley, too, was silent for a moment longer. Then:

"I shouldn't like to put a question to any woman that she didn't want to answer," he said. "But a man gets thinking, you see. And, of course, I saw you and Mr. Warwick together to-night. You might tell me if—if you've been out with him instead of with me?"

"No," she answered promptly. "I have never been out with Mr. Warwick anywhere, at any time. To-night I went out for a short walk alone, and he had just ridden up on his bicycle when you passed us. No; I have never been out with him, scarcely even spoken to him

except at the school, and then always in the children's presence."

She heard him draw another quick breath; then he laughed as a man laughs who is puzzled about something.

"There must be some reason why you didn't want to meet me these last three Saturdays," he said. "I've heard my mother say that you should never expect a reason from a woman, but that a woman always has a reason. Perhaps I'm one of the sort that's never satisfied without a reason. And in this case I've been wondering and studying and thinking about it, and, hang it all, I couldn't think what it was!"

She remained silent until they had walked a little way farther, and then she said, in a voice that was somewhat unsteady:

"I've always found you so honest and straightforward and kind that I'll tell you the reason, because you'll respect it. I didn't want you to kiss me again."

Beverley felt as if he had suddenly strayed into a new world. An honest-natured, clean-minded, somewhat happy-go-lucky young animal, he had very little knowledge of the subtle intricacies of the feminine mind, and he felt himself at this moment in the presence of

a problem which he knew himself unable to comprehend, absolutely unfitted to solve. He whistled softly once more, and lifting his head as he did so, saw that they had come to the giant oak. He laid his hand gently on April's arm.

"Look here," he said, "I told you I wanted to talk to you; let's sit down a bit. After all, it's not so very late."

She sat down without demur and he took a seat at her side.

"What made you say that, just now?" he asked.

"I could not tell you if I tried," she answered.

"Then, in that case, there isn't any reason?"

"No reason; at least, I can't say. A feeling, perhaps."

"But you didn't have that feeling three weeks since," he urged.

"No," she answered frankly, "I hadn't."

Again she was getting beyond his depth. He sat knitting his forehead, pursing his lips, trying to understand. At last he touched her arm: there was something in the touch that was of the nature of an appeal.

"I say, you know," he said, "there—there

must have been something during the last three weeks that's—well, made you think a bit differently about that sort of thing. I'm a thick-headed kind of chap, I know—nobody knows better—but I can see through some things. Between you and me, now, eh? what was it?"

He bent nearer to her; he heard her breath come quicker.

"Yes," she said, "there was something. Mr. Warwick saw you kiss me when we parted at the grove of chestnuts that day—the last time I was out with you. He could not help it, he was sitting there. He—he spoke to me."

"Preached? Though he doesn't seem a preach-y sort," said Beverley, generously.

"No—spoke—like a—like a man. He asked me if I was engaged to you. I said No. Then he asked me why I allowed you to kiss me, and said that some day *the* man would come along, and wouldn't I like to keep even the little things for him? And—then I began to think. That's all. You—do you understand?"

Beverley nodded his head two or three times.

"Yes, I think I understand," he said slowly.

"And I'd lay odds the parson's right. Seems, somehow, as if it let a bit of light in on things —I suppose one does a lot of things without thinking. Well! There isn't a child in any one of these cottages, though, that's a bit more innocent than you are in my eyes. Bless you, do you think—— Great Scott, no! I'd like you always to think of me as a man."

"I'm thinking a great deal more of you as a man to-night than I ever did before," she said, with warmth.

Beverley drew a long breath.

"But you don't love me?" he said.

"No, not in that way," she answered, "I don't."

"That's the style!" he said heartily. "I like that. No beating about the bush for me. I'm wondering if I love you. I'm more than a bit fond of you; you're the prettiest and sweetest girl I've ever known, and a long way the cleverest, and you've a good heart and a kind one. And yet—I don't know—I don't know! Perhaps there's a shade of something wanting between us. And yet, when we met each other just now, I was fully intending to ask you to marry me. That's a fact!"

She made no answer to this, and he presently spoke again: "I was. I am going to leave St. Quentin's; I've bought a very good partnership in the West of England. And—well, I didn't like the idea of leaving you behind; I wanted to marry you and take you with me. You do get fond of people when you've been with them a good deal. But I can see now it wouldn't have done. I'm not a fool—you're meant for something better than——"

"No—no, don't say that!" she said. "That's not——"

"Oh, never mind, I know," he said. "Look here, I'm going to say something to you. Don't mind it—it's said out of all kindness. You're in love yourself."

He saw her bend forward and lift her hands to her face, and he laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Never mind!" he said as soothingly as if he were speaking to a child in pain; "it'll come as right as—as ninepence. I'll lay a thousand pounds to a penny that he's in love with you. Well! By Jove, there'll be nobody in the world better pleased than I shall; I'd give a good deal to know that you were happy."

She suddenly turned, all warmth and impulse, and laid her hand on his.

"Oh," she said, "you're kind—good—that was manly of you! I never liked you one half so much as I do now. I shall always think of you as you've been to-night."

"You're sure you couldn't marry me?" he said, half in jest, half in earnest.

"If it were sufficient to know that you were a good man and a kind one, I believe I would," she answered, after a pause. "But—there's something else, I think."

"Yes," he said musingly. "I suppose there is!"

After a silence of some minutes he said:

"I must go; I'll walk back with you. If I go away to take up this partnership, you know, I shall come to say good-bye to you."

"Oh, yes, yes!" she answered.

Half an hour later as she sat in her little parlour wondering about the strange events of the evening she heard a slight tap at the door of the schoolhouse. She took up the bedroom candle which she had just lighted and went to answer this unwonted summons. It was strange, she thought, that

any one should come to the house at so late an hour.

When she had drawn back the bolt and opened the door a little way the faint light of the candle revealed Warwick standing, hatless, on the path outside.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECOND HALF OF THE SAME PROVERB

The surprise and wonder on the little schoolmistress's face made Warwick speak quickly. But quickly as he spoke, it was not before he had seen the colour mount to her cheeks and a light which he was beginning to understand come into her eyes.

"Don't be afraid!" he said. "It is only this: old Henny Simpson has been very ill to-night—they thought she was dying. They fetched me across to see her; she is better now, but nothing will satisfy her but the sight of you. Will you come to her?"

April turned back into the parlour without a word. She caught up a wrap, and, throwing it over her head and shoulders, extinguished the candle, turned down the lamp, and joined Warwick in the garden. Side by side they

walked across the green. It struck her as a strange, almost mysterious thing that here she should be walking where she had walked with Beverley scarcely an hour earlier.

"Has she been very ill?" she asked, after they had walked a little way in the darkness.

"One of her heart-attacks," answered Warwick. "I thought she was dead when I got there, but she rallied wonderfully. When I came away just now she had so far recovered as to be able to scold her daughter-in-law for some fault or other—I think they don't get on together very well. You must tell her to be good and to go to sleep."

"Then you don't think she will die—to-night?"

"It would never surprise me if she were found dead at any time, after learning what the doctor says of her," answered Warwick. "But she has such wonderful powers of recuperation that she's as much alive five minutes after you've thought her quite dead as she often seems quite dead five minutes after you've thought her very much alive! You've more influence over her than anybody; you must make her stop talking. When she

begins her lamentations over 'Our Thomas's Wife' her eloquence is not easily to be exhausted."

They heard the old woman's tongue going as Warwick lifted the latch of the cottage door. Inside the little living place, lighted only by a dip candle, everything was very gloomy; mysterious shadows were in every corner, strange darknesses and cavernous impalpabilities clung ghost-like about the great four-poster bed at the extreme end of the room, wherein, a thing whiter than the pillows on which it rested, or the frilled cap which framed it, the old woman's gaunt, craggy-featured face showed like a piece of colourless marble. Near the stick fire, surlily silent, the daughter-in-law, a big, raw-boned woman whose appearance suggested many years of drudgery in the house and labour in all sorts of weather in the fields, stood, hands on hips, staring at the recumbent figure much as an unemotional animal might stare at something which torments it, and is yet beneath its notice. She turned her head, and her lips curled a little, as Warwick and the little schoolmistress came into view.

"How is she now, Mrs. Thomas?" asked Warwick. "Any quieter?"

The woman sniffed.

"Nay!" she said; "shoo's on at t' owd game agen—nowt but makkin' complaints about t' way shoo's tret. An' I'm shewre 'at I do all I can—ye can't expect a woman that's gotten five young bairns on her own an' 'at goes out to work i' t' land, as I do, allus to be on t' doorstep; I come in an' do for her as oft as iver I can."

"I'm sure you do your best," said Warwick; "you mustn't mind what she says—she's getting very old, you know."

"Why, sir, I'm shewre I wish no ill to onybody," said the daughter-in-law; "but I do oft think at it 'ud be a mercy if the Lord 'ud tak' her. Ye see, there's nobody but me to sit up wi' her to-night; our Thomas had to get out o' bed to fetch you, and he's that tired out—he wor up this mornin' at three o'clock to go to York wi' some sheep from Mestur Hancock's, and he wern't back till late, and then he'd walked all way theer an' back; and I'm about done up mysen, for I been at it, one way or another, iver sin' it wor light. Howsumivver, I mun try to get a wink o' sleep i' t' easy chair theer."

"An' shoo niver browt ma eyther bite or sup fro' teatime till it wor past dark,"

piped the querulous voice from the four-poster. "Theer I wor, liggin all bi mysen, same as if I'd been a rig-weltered yowe wi' nobody to turn it ovver! It's fair shameful, t' way 'at our Thomas's wife treats me now 'at I'm bedridden, an'——"

April went over to the bed and laid her hand on the old woman's forehead.

"Hush, Henny, hush; you're to go to sleep," she said. Then turning to the daughter-in-law she whispered, "You go home and get to bed, Mary. I'll sit up with her, and if she gets worse I'll let you and your husband know at once."

The woman sighed with obvious relief.

"Why, thankin' you kindly, miss," she said, "I'm sure it's real good on you, but I should be thankful, for I'm that heavy wi' sleep I can hardlin's keep my ees oppen. You're shewre, miss, 'at you won't——"

"I shall be all right, Mary. Go and make yourself comfortable about your mother-in-law; I'll attend to her."

The woman made no further objection—it was easy to see with what relief she left the cottage. The young minister and the little schoolmistress were alone with the old, worn-out creature in the big, dimity-covered bed:

all around them the village and the land lay locked in sleep.

". . . I owt to have my broth reg'lar—that's what t' doctor said—reg'lar, he said, so he did. But our Thomas's wife . . ."

"Now, Henny, you must stop talking and go to sleep," said the little schoolmistress. "I'm here, sitting by you."

The old woman's eyes opened. She turned her head a little.

"Is that thee, Joy?" she said. "Why, now, then, thou's allus a seet for sore eyes. I think I will go to sleep now—I've had me broth; t' minister cam' and gev me summat an' all—meddycine he calls it, but he can't tek an owd woman like me in. It wor sperrits! Theer's some more in a bottle i' t' cupboard; he gev orders, did t' minister, 'at I wor to have a drop more after a bit."

"Yes, you shall have some more—when you wake up. Now you're going to sleep."

"Ay, I'll go to sleep. Sing summat."

Without hesitation the girl began to sing a simple cradle-song in a soft, low, soothing voice. In a few minutes she ceased: the old woman was asleep. She remained at her side for a while longer; then she rose, and, drawing the bed-curtains together, turned to

Warwick, who had remained by the hearth watching her.

"She is asleep now," she whispered. "I will stay with her; I shall be able to do anything that she wants. If I am very tired in the morning, perhaps Maud Gill or Ruth Hancock would play the harmonium instead of me?"

Warwick remained in the same attitude, looking at her intently.

"You don't think I'm going to leave you here—alone?" he said.

She looked at him with surprise.

"But there is no necessity for you to stop," she said.

"All the same, I am going to stop," he answered; "that's settled."

He noiselessly lifted the easy chair from its corner and set it near the fire, on which he threw a fresh handful of sticks from the pile which lay drying on the hearth. He pointed to the easy chair; there was something authoritative, masterful, in the gesture which made the girl obey his obvious command. He, himself, sat down on a stool, with his back leaning against the upright of the mantelpiece. Over him and her, and on the flickering lights and

shades of the house-place, a silence, as deep as that of the night outside, fell like a behest of fate.

The girl became conscious that the man was watching her. His face was in shadow; hers was in such light as the flickering gleams of the stick fire afforded. She sat staring at these gleams, conscious that something in him—some vast, terrible power that had never been in her life before—was forcing her to respond to his earnest searching of her face and soul. She felt this power drawing her, calling her, against her will, with her will; now she resisted it; now she went madly, joyously, to meet it; now she fled again from it in a tumult of agitation; now she ran to welcome it, certain and assured of its reality beyond doubt and fear. And at last, after a long, soul-awakening silence that seemed to have lasted for years, she lifted her face and looked at him steadily. In this candid, yet subtly swift, lightning-like inspection of each other's souls, these two spoke together, made question and answer, settled their affairs in this world, their hopes of all to come, without a word being uttered by their lips.

He bent a little forward presently and laid

his right hand on hers as it lay, quiet, tremorless, on her knee.

"With all your heart and soul, whatever may come, for ever and ever?" he said in a whisper that went thrilling through her as some insistent note of music thrills into the corners of a silent room and searches out their farthest recesses.

She laid her other hand on his and looked calmly at him.

"With all my heart and soul, whatever may come, for ever and ever!" she repeated.

He remained in the same position, gazing at her.

"I believe I loved you from the first moment I saw you," he said.

"I am sure that I have loved you since you made me see into my own self," she answered.

"And that was——?" he asked.

"That night after you had seen Mr. Beverley kiss me," she replied.

He smiled.

"I have never kissed a woman in my life!" he said, and smiled again. "And it doesn't seem to me—now—now!—that any man has ever kissed you."

"No!" she said, nodding her head; "it

doesn't seem to me, now, that anybody ever did. And yet, Mr. Beverley kissed me; but only that once."

His eyes encouraged her.

"I couldn't tell you a lie," she went on, "if I were to lose your love for it. I think I liked him to give me that one kiss. I thought nothing of it; it seemed natural, and I wanted to be—cared for, in some way. After that time, when I woke up to realisation, it would have killed me if he had ever kissed me again."

His silence was urging her to lay bare her heart.

"That was why I would not go out with him again," she continued. "It was—impossible. Truly, indeed, all that time I had never thought of love; I was a child."

Warwick laid his other hand on hers, caressingly.

"And—he?" he said.

She nodded her head with quick comprehension.

"I want to tell you," she answered. "To-night, after I had left you, I sat under the oak on the green, thinking about—a great many things. When, at last, I went home, I met Mr. Beverley—he was waiting for me outside

the schoolhouse. He wanted to ask me why I had not been out with him for the past three weeks. I told him—at last—why—that I did not wish him to kiss me again. He reminded me that he had never kissed me but just that once, and that I had not reproved him. That was true. Then I told him that you had seen it and of what you had said to me. I told him that you had asked me if I were engaged to him, and that I had answered No. I told him, too, that I had—come to see things."

She began to stroke Warwick's hand, looking at it as if the mere sight of its strength helped her.

"I want to say this," she went on. "Mr. Beverley is a good man. I never liked him one-half so much as I did to-night. He is not a clever man; but, in his way, he understood—everything. No man, not even you, could have been more kind, more sympathetic. And yet he had come to ask me to marry him."

She paused, and for a little time sat looking at the fire with eyes which seemed to be endeavouring to form some possible image of a problematic future. At last she turned again to Warwick and smiled wistfully.

"I suppose," she said—"I suppose that if it had not been for you, I should have married him. And yet, as he himself said to-night, we were neither of us in love with each other in the real sense. Fond of each other! yes, I suppose we were. He is a nice man, and so young and boyish, and—but you will understand. And I want you to know this: he told me that I was in love with you, and he spoke so kindly, and in such a manly way about it, that I told him that I had never liked him so much before. Do you understand? do you?"

"Yes," said Warwick, "I understand."

"That is all," she said.

He took both her hands in his, and, holding them closely in his own, looked at her long and ardently.

"I think you are the dearest soul in the world!" he said. "To me, as long as we live, there will never be anything like you. Is it really, really true that you love me?"

She looked at him with a face that at first was full of grave feeling, then changed to that subtle indulgent feeling which only a woman's eyes and mouth can show in certain moments to the man she loves, and she smiled.

"Love you!" she said. "Oh, as if I could put it into words! You'll just have to feel it, to live with it, die with it before you know how much. You'll only be learning about it when it's so old that you'll have forgotten how it all came to begin!"

Warwick drew her nearer to him—their faces came very close together. Suddenly she drew back.

"No!" she said. "Don't kiss me—yet! I want to think about it, to realise all that it means. It is filling my mind now—that. It will mean such a lot. There will be no more of me, myself, left after it, you see. I shall give you my life, heart, soul, body, everything with it!"

They sat before the stick fire throughout the night, sometimes talking in whispers, sometimes looking at each other in big stretches of happy, confident silence. Now and then the old woman woke and called for her nurse; now and then she had an attack of weakness, and they stood by her bedside expecting to see her suddenly pass out into the land of shadows on whose borders she had lingered for so many years. But there was still life and toughness in old Henny, and after each journey towards the valley she came back her

old self, to wait for the inevitable end, and in the meantime to show some of her old characteristics.

"Aw, it's ye two, is it?" she said in one of these rallies. "An' shewre I am 'at I'm very much obligated to both on ye for attendin' a poor old bedridden woman like what I am. I should hev' poor doin's i' this vale of tears if I wor left to our Thomas's wife—shoo's ower many bairns to look after. An' that reminds me, Joy, 'at there's a real chiney teapot on t' top o' t' corner cupboard 'at I mean ye to have when I'm safe in Abraham's bosom; ye an' t' minister theer can drink yer tea out o' it when ye're wed—for sartin shewre I am 'at ye will be wed—I could allus see it in yer faces. I knew; I'm none wi'out eyes."

In the early dawn came back the daughter-in-law, refreshed with sleep and profound of thanks. She would stay with the old woman now, she said, until morning, and a neighbour would come in at eight o'clock for the rest of the day.

Warwick and April left the cottage together. In the deep porch which enclosed the door they paused. Across the green the sun was rising, a great blaze of golden

glory; in the topmost boughs of the oak a thrush sent forth one long ecstatic note of joy. With a great sigh of glad content the girl put her hands in the man's and lifted her face to his.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RIVALS MAKE COMMON CAUSE

THERE comes a day in the early history of all lovers whereon these happy couples, who have strayed, it may be all unconsciously, within the gates of the earthly Paradise, are bound to ask themselves, separately and conjointly, whether they are going to keep their secret to their own knowledge only or to allow their immediate world to share in it there and then. For a while, the young minister and the schoolmistress were too much afraid of the great joy which had come into their lives to speak of it themselves by other than looks. They neither found nor invented opportunities of meeting each other than those which duty provided for them. But the hour which Warwick spent in the schoolroom every morning—spent in the presence of some three or four score youthful eyes—and the ten

minutes spent with April every Saturday morning while he and she went over the books and registers for the week were now periods of blissful enchantment, despite the fact that he was always the minister and she always the schoolmistress. Where true love is leaping and throbbing it is an easy matter to make expression of it under a thousand noses without letting one of them catch a scent of its subtle fragrance, and if these two neither looked at nor spoke to each other in exterior presences in aught but accents of ordinary politeness, you may be sure that the mere fact of their being under one roof together and within a few feet of each other included a whole world of emotion and sensation in itself. And since even ministers and schoolmistresses are human the Saturday morning *tête-à-tête* was not always given up to discussing the books and registers, the good conduct or the bad behaviour of the Tommy Stubbses and Mary Ellen Robinsons, whose scholastic careers Mr. Warwick and Miss May were responsible for. It would be an unreasonable person who could blame these two because the minister, bending over one book, murmured some term of endearment, and the schoolmistress, affecting to be deeply

engrossed in another, responded in a whisper which set his pulses thrilling.

On one of these occasions, Warwick, who was adding up a column of figures, murmured:

"Would it be very wrong indeed if I were to put my arm round you, and draw your head on my shoulder, and kiss you?"

"Very wrong indeed, seeing that you do not come here as my—well, mine—but as the school-manager. School-managers do not kiss their schoolmistresses. At least, they're not supposed to."

"And yet——"

"Yes?"

"I never have you to myself at any other time."

"What a doleful sigh! But—do you call this having me to yourself! Why, there are windows all round the walls through which any one might look at any moment; besides which, Joseph might come in to clean the said windows, or Mrs. Fowler to wash the floor. No, sir; no!"

"I have been wondering," he went on, in a serious tone, "if we ought to tell these people that we are going to marry each other. If it rested entirely with me, I should let them

all know it at once; I should be proud to let them know. But I can see some disadvantages —for you."

"I can see a great many disadvantages for both," she answered. "To begin with, we should at once bring down upon us the implacable anger of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock."

"Why! What has that——?"

"Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock have daughters of their own, and you are a very eligible young man. Therefore, if they heard that you had preferred me to their own offspring—— Don't you see, you dear, simple boy?"

"If you speak to me like that I shall certainly forget that I am the school-manager, and you the schoolmistress, and that there are nearly a dozen windows in this place. Well, and the rest?"

"That was to begin with. To end with: it would, I fear, be impossible for me to remain here. And—I do not want to go away —now."

Warwick drew a long breath.

"No!" he said. "And if you went, I should have to go too. And I can't do that."

"Of course you can't until Mr. Robinson

returns. Do you think I'd care a scrap for you if you deserted your post to run after me? Oh, yes, I should, though—shouldn't I? But you can't leave."

"The only thing to do," he said slowly, "is to keep our secret to ourselves until my duty is finished. Then we will be married, and for a whole six months, before I settle down to work again, I will take you to Italy. It will be spring, and we are young."

She uttered a low note of ecstatic delight.

"In the meantime," he went on, "we must just work hard here. After all, we see each other every day, and are alone, though in this formal capacity, for a few minutes every Saturday; and the time will soon come when we shall be always together."

But Warwick, being young and inexperienced in the ways of love, was too sure of his strength to resist indulgence in the companionship of the woman he loved. There came a summer morning whereon all nature seemed to be calling to man and maid to go forth into the woods and valleys, to follow the winding streams, to explore the deep recesses. He went over to the schoolhouse that morning

with the impulses of a lover who wants the close, the uninterrupted society of the beloved in places where he and she can be alone with the Great Mother who smiles in silence.

"It is shameful," he said, as he and April went through the books—"shameful that on a day like this I can't take you out into the woods, into the land—anywhere! I have never had you all to myself for even a short half-hour since that night in Henny Simpson's cottage. Let us go somewhere this very afternoon!"

He saw the colour rise in her cheeks; her violet eyes grew soft with longing.

"We can meet outside the village," he went on, "and then we can cross the river at Norman's Ferry and be in another world. It is beautiful country across the river—fine wooded country. There is an old castle, and an older church, and a quiet little inn where we can get tea. Shall we go?"

There never yet lived a real woman who refused the urgent request of the man she loved in such a matter as this. She said Yes with a heart dancing with joy, and true woman-like immediately began to think of how she would best array herself to please him. They

met, they went; once across the river they seemed to be as far away from Applemarney as Applemarney is from the Andes. They wandered through woods and by streams; they explored the old castle and the ancient church; they had tea together in the old inn: the landlady, seeing that they had eyes for nobody but themselves, forbore to talk to them. And in the eventide, hand-in-hand wherever they could, they went homeward, having lived a thousand happy years in a few short hours.

And in the ferry-boat was Thomas Henry Gill's shepherd, Mr. Timothy Barber, a gentleman who was always loquacious, but especially so when he had taken a little extra liquor, as he had on this occasion, having been over to what he called "T'other side o' t' watter" on business concerning some prize hogs.

"I think t' minister's doin' a bit o' courtin' wi' t' little schoolmistress," said Mr. Barber to Mrs. Gill as she gave him his supper in the kitchen of the Lowlands Farm on his return that night. "Leastways him and her they cam' over t' watter i' t' same ferry-boat 'at I cam' in, an' I made out from their talk 'at they'd been spendin' t' afternoon over theer

by t' owd castle. An' a varry nice couple an' all they did look, an' I'm shewre I don't see nowt to blame i' a preycher hevin' a bit o' fun wi' t' lasses if he's ta'en that way—he's nowt but a man when all's said an' done—I used to run after t' lasses a deal when I wor a lad."

Mrs. Gill went to bed that night sorely exercised in spirit. She had given Mr. Timothy Barber an extra pint of ale in full belief that when wine goes in truth comes out, and it was apparent to her that between the minister and the schoolmistress things were going too far. Yet there was no perceptible alteration in her behaviour towards Warwick when the community gathered together at the schoolhouse that day—if anything, she was more cordial than usual. A chastened spirit seemed to characterise her dealings at home, and, beyond remarking once or twice that the world we live in is more wicked than some of us imagine, she was her own self in a subdued fashion.

But after the evening service was over and the Gills and Hancocks were crossing the green together, their homeward path lying in the same direction for some little distance, Mrs. Gill successfully manœuvred to secure Mrs.

Hancock as her sole companion, and under pretence of admiring the foliage of the giant oak kept her back behind the rest.

"There's a little matter as I wish to speak to you about, Mrs. Hancock," she said meaningly: "a matter that's for no ears but yours. We'll just let the gentlemen and the two girls get on in front a bit; I wouldn't like any of them to hear what I've got to say to you for worlds."

Mrs. Hancock's curiosity was aroused. She shortened her usual vigorous stride, and scented—confidences.

"Anything as you tell me, Mrs. Gill, 'll go no farther, you may be sure. I were never one to give away another person's secret," she said.

Mrs. Gill coughed behind her black glove.

"The fact is, Mrs. Hancock," she said in a low voice, "poor Mestur Warwick's got entrapped by that brazen-faced little hussy at the school. And him such a sensible young man!"

Mrs. Hancock almost gasped in her astonishment.

"You don't say!" she exclaimed. "Why, I've never seen naught of it, Mrs. Gill."

"Nor me," said Mrs. Gill. "Which shows

how sly and deceitful the young woman is. Who knows what she mayn't have been doing with the poor young man! Howsumever, she was caught last night, as you might say i' the very act—the very act, I assure you, Mrs. Hancock."

"Who caught her?" asked Mrs. Hancock in a hushed voice.

Mrs. Gill shook her head with an air of absolute assurance.

"Timothy Barber, as has been our trusted shepherd, for all that he is a little given to the liquor, for these twenty year," she said, "were sent by the master yesterday, as was Saturday, into the country across the water to see about some prize hogs, as he thinks o' buyin'. And, of course, he had to come and go by the Norman's Ferry, there being no other way, unless, indeed, you go right round by St. Quentin's. And coming back at night, lo and behold! who should come down to the bank to the ferry, while Timothy was waitin' in the boat, but Mestur Warwick and the schoolmistress! And a-laughin' and talkin' together, Timothy said, in quite a sweetheartin' way. He made out from their talk, did Timothy, that they'd been spending the afternoon together, and he said that when

they came to the other side Mestur Warwick gev' her his hand to help her up the bank. And if you can countenance such goings on, Mrs. Hancock, it's more nor what I should expect of you after our one-and-twenty year of friendship!"

Mrs. Hancock walked on a few yards in silence. She seemed to be meditating deeply. At last she broke out.

"An' him a-playin' the pianny to my Ruth as he has done a-many times after he's tea'd with us!" she exclaimed. "Theer he'd sit on the pianny-stool an' play piece after piece 'at I'm sure I couldn't make head nor tail on, though our Ruth said it were lovely music. An' I'm sure I did think, Mrs. Gill, as how it might come to be 'at him an' our Ruth 'ud mek a match of it—they're both that musically inclined."

Mrs. Gill, who had heard this information with feelings which it was fortunate Mrs. Hancock could not acquaint herself with, dissembled those feelings very successfully, and replied in an offhand fashion:

"Well, I'm sure, Mrs. Hancock, I don't know what attentions the young man may have paid to your dowter, but I may say as how he's been very affable and engagin' to my Maud

Mary, as was natural, considering the boardin'-school eddikation she received at the Misses Bowkerby's, in York. But that's neither here nor there: what I'm thinking of is the way that designing minx has got round the minister; you can see he knows no more of women than he does of babies. And now I can put two and two together—Young Beverley's left St. Quentin's and taken a practice in the West Country. Theer, you see! as soon as one's back is turned she lays herself out to entangle another! Sich-like ought to he whipped, Mrs. Hancock!"

"Mrs. Gill," said Mrs. Hancock, "you and me is by all rights the principalest ladies of the congregation. It's our duty to see this young man, and to warn him—solemn!"

"Then to-morrow morning, Mrs. Hancock, at eleven," said Mrs. Gill; "and i' the meantime we'll keep what we know to ourselves. But two things theer is, Mrs. Hancock, to bear in mind: the young man must be dealt with faithful, and the young woman must be sent away."

Warwick was in no way surprised when Our Bet opened the door of the study the next morning and announced Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock.

"They're in their best clothes and that solemn 'at they might be goin' to a funeral," said Our Bet. "Will ye see 'em, or no?"

Warwick desired that the ladies should be shown in to him there and then, and on their entrance he greeted them cordially, and, having installed them in easy chairs, offered them wine and cake. From the fact that each refused these hospitalities he argued that the ladies had a message to him. He waited patiently for its coming.

"Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Hancock at last, "we've heerd sad tidings, has me and Mrs. Gill—tidings as has given us pain."

"Great pain," said Mrs. Gill, smoothing out her silk skirt.

"I am very sorry," said Warwick; "is it anything in which I can be of use?"

Mrs. Hancock looked at the ceiling; Mrs. Gill studied the wall-paper.

"To tell you the truth, Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Gill, suddenly, "we're a-speaking of news as we've heard of you. We heard as how you took the schoolmistress out on Saturday afternoon a-pleasure-making."

"Very true—so I did," said Warwick. "Very much we enjoyed ourselves, too."

Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill looked at each other.

"Mestur Warwick," said Mrs. Hancock pathetically, "you're a very young man, and you've lost your poor dear mother. It would pain me and Mrs. Gill to see you fall a victim to a designing creature."

"It would give me much more to be such a victim, Mrs. Hancock."

"Mestur Warwick, it is our duty to warn you" said Mrs. Gill. "Now, of course, if it had been an accomplished young lady like my Maud Mary or a good gel like Mrs. Hancock's Ruth, nobody could ha' had a word to say. But to take up with a young woman who has already been talked about as Miss May has——"

Warwick lifted his hand. There was something in his face that made the two women shrink.

"Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill," he said quietly, "since that is your errand I may as well tell you at once that Miss May and myself are engaged to be married. As I am not the sort of man to love what I cannot respect, it is obvious that my respect for Miss May is as great as my love for her. You will therefore please say no more. But I must say one word

to both of you: be good enough in future not to meddle with my private affairs. Good-morning to you."

Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill found themselves politely but silently bowed out.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MEN ENTER THE ARENA

Warwick, hands in pockets and head bent, watched Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill traverse the garden of the chapel-house and sail out into the sunlit road in front of it. He was feeling very hot, and very angry, and very contemptuous of them and of all evil-minded folk, but he smiled as he watched them—they were so suggestive of a great line-of-battle ship forging ahead in company with a waspish little torpedo-destroyer. In the mien of each he read many things

"That, in vulgar and expressive parlance," he said, as he went back to the study—"that has done it! People who are always ready to speak their minds to other people can never bear plain-speaking themselves; those who are quick to find faults in others are slow to see faults in themselves; those who are

the first to cast a stone, and choose the largest and heaviest they can find, are the first to cry to heaven if any hand flings a pebble at themselves. A useful string of platitude-y truisms! Well, now one sees many coasts clearly."

He took up his hat and walked across the green to the schoolhouse. He had already been there that morning: had, in fact, only just returned from there when his visitors were announced, and April was astonished to see him return. She saw at once that something had happened, and she went to meet him as he entered the schoolroom.

"I want to speak to you—in private—at once," he said. "Leave your assistant in charge of the school and come into your parlour."

He went back into the porch and waited for her. When she came to him they passed into the little parlour together. Warwick had never entered it before. He looked round about him at the flowers, the books, the cottage piano, the little work-table with its odds and ends of femininity, with a curious sense of having been admitted to some sacrarium, and, before he said a word, he laid his hands on the girl's shoulder and kissed her forehead.

"Something has happened?" she said.

He laughed.

"I have just had a call from Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock together," he said, and laughed again.

She leaned against the centre table watching him.

"I suppose it was inevitable?" he said.

She nodded her head, with decision.

"Absolutely inevitable after our ride in the ferry-boat with Timothy," she replied.

Warwick looked at her whimsically.

"In the opinion of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock," he said, "I am the victim of a designing creature."

"That's—me!"

"You are a nice person to be an instructress of youth! Where's your grammar? Yes—you! Five foot five of woman-flesh, some seven stone in weight—and a designing creature! Now, I believe, Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock are, somewhere deep down within them, possessed of a certain sense of humour. They have formulated a theory that this little woman——"

"There's nothing very pertinent in that, and it's not new," she said. "Come, I must get back to the children. What happened?"

Warwick's face assumed an expression which April had never seen on it before. He showed anger, scorn, contempt; she noticed that the veins of the hand which grasped his walking-stick suddenly swelled into great knots.

"I hate meanness, and spite, and evil-speaking!" he said; "I hate them beyond expression. They are the vilest sins, the most abominable sins, of which any human being can be capable. And so when Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock began—I say began—to speak against you I checked them there and then. I told them that you and I were engaged to be married, and that, as I am not the sort of man to love what I cannot respect, it followed that my respect for you is as great as my love. And—I could not help it!—I added that in future I should be glad if they would abstain from interfering with my private affairs—and then—I showed them the door."

April gasped, and looked horror and admiration.

"The two deacons' wives!"

"Fiddlesticks!"

"But you—the minister?"

"I have done, and am doing, and shall do my duty as minister. I shall also do my duty

as—man. A pretty man I should have been if at a juncture like that I had not first thought of—you!"

She went impulsively to him and laid her hand on the hand which rested on his stick, the other on his shoulder.

"I shall never forget that as long as I live!" she said. "Thank you."

After a few moments she said:

"Well, dear, now it is all out; and, do you know, I am glad, proud, that it is. But I shall have to go."

Warwick shook his head.

"No," he said; "no. I began to think that part of it over as soon as Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock had gone. You have no one who could come and live with you until we are married? No one—bah!—to play propriety?—hateful, stinking word!"

"Why, you know I have no one in the world but some cousins who are not in England!" she answered. "I told you, on Saturday."

He patted her shoulder.

"Then I am going to ask almost the only relation I have in the world to come and stop with you," he said. "My Aunt Mary—my father's sister. She was head-mistress of a

famous girls' school in the North of England, and since she retired five years ago she has never ceased from globe-trotting. It will do her good to rest from wandering hither and thither for a while—and she will do anything for me. She is a fine woman—in more ways than one; and she stands nearly six feet and has a more or less masculine mind."

"Shall I—please her?"

Warwick laughed.

"Never mind, wait and see. There is a room here that she can have?"

"A nice, large room, yes."

"Then I shall write to her to-day, and within three days she will be here. Now go back to your work." He drew her to him and kissed her. "I don't pretend," he said, "that we may not have many unpleasantnesses to encounter. What we must do here is our plain duty: you on this side of the green, I on the other. I am glad, April, that we can show our love proudly and openly—even to Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock."

She held him back for a moment.

"I don't want you," she said, "to think too hardly of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock. They are very kind, very good—no, you are not to make a face!—I say, very good women, and

it is not their fault if they are narrow-minded, and ignorant, and fond of gossip. After all, how much have they to interest them outside their own little, every-day, trumpery affairs? Is it a wonder that they jump at a tiny breath of gossip as starved cats jump at a scrap of meat? Is it?"

Warwick laughed and patted her shining head, and lifted her face to look at its steadfast gravity.

"Philosopher in petticoats!" he said.

"No, but I'm serious," she insisted. "You see, perhaps I understand Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock better than you do, because I'm a woman."

Being a woman it occasioned April little surprise to find two immediate results of Warwick's admission to Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock: one, that the news of her engagement to the young minister spread through the village with lightning-like rapidity; the other, that Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock lost no time in laying down the law upon the matter to their respective spouses, Thomas Henry and Benjamin, as deacons. Those worthy gentlemen, receiving the tidings, were, on the impulse of their hearts, inclined to say, "God bless 'em both. Long life to 'em!" and to

drink minister's and schoolmistress's healths in a bumper. But a mere glance at Mrs. Gill's face on the part of Thomas Henry, a mere word from Mrs. Hancock falling on the well-trained ear of Benjamin—these things were quite sufficient to stifle all human nature in the hearts of the two husbands, and to make them realise that some inscrutable fate had decreed that at the Manor Farm and at the Lowlands the grey mare was the better horse.

And thus it came to pass that on the eve of the day whereon Warwick was expecting his Aunt Mary—who, upon the receipt of her nephew's letter, made all haste to pack her trunks and depart for Arcadia—he was waited upon by the two deacons, both very solemn, both in their Sunday best, and both obviously ill at ease. He received them cheerily and frankly; they found themselves installed in easy chairs and in possession of whisky-and-soda and good cigars before they quite knew where they were. Warwick, who never drank spirits, but was a lover of good ale, pledged them in ale in all heartiness, and began to talk to them as freely as if no cloud had arisen to overshadow the usual placid expanses of Applemarney. Benjamin Hancock and Thomas Henry Gill, thinking of what

a delightful evening they might have had with this companionable, unconventional, young minister if it had not been for the dread mission which their wives had imposed upon them, groaned in spirit. The whisky was of the best; the cigars were excellent; there was an ample supply of both, and Warwick was an ideal host.

"I think we mun draw it mild, Benjamin," said Mr. Gill, when Warwick had left them to themselves for a few minutes. "I'm shewre I never tasted a better drop of whisky in my life!"

"It's a message that I've no stomach to deliver, Mestur Gill," replied Mr. Hancock. "And as you say, it *is* a drop o' good whisky —old and sound."

It was a long time before Mr. Gill and Mr. Hancock summoned up courage to speak faithfully. But at last Mr. Gill nerved himself to the task.

"So you've some thoughts of becoming a wed man, Mestur Warwick?" he said with a feeble attempt to smile roguishly. "Little birds, sir, little birds is apt to carry news."

"And not only birds, I believe," said Warwick. "Yes, Mr. Gill, that news is quite correct. I am very glad and very proud to

say that I am engaged to be married to Miss May."

Mr. Gill coughed ; Mr. Hancock contemplated the ceiling. There was a brief silence.

"Well, of course," said Mr. Gill. "We all hev' our different tastes. One man thinks one way and another thinks another way. This Jack makes choice of one Jill, and that Jack makes choice of another Jill, as one might term it. Matrimony, sir, is a serious matter."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Gill," said Warwick, "matrimony is a most serious matter."

Mr. Hancock cleared his throat.

"I don't know, Mestur Warwick," he began, still contemplating the ceiling and speaking very slowly—"I don't know, sir, as to whether you've sufficiently considered the solemn step you're speaking of taking. Now, of course, sir, the minister of a community like ours is not in what you might call an entirely free position. He isn't as it were a private person. He has a congregation, sir, and he has deacons. Two deacons."

"You and Mr. Gill," said Warwick ; "precisely. But, Mr. Hancock, I may as well tell you that I entirely dissent from your arguments. I am a free agent, a free man. I am your

minister; what is more, I am your spiritual pastor, a fact of which, I trust, I shall never have to remind you. If I fail in my duties, in any single particular, I will cheerfully and patiently accept any admonition from you or Mr. Gill. But with my private affairs you have no concern, nor shall I allow you to interfere in them. I speak plainly to you."

"Well, sir," said Mr. Hancock, after a pause, "there's nobody likes plainer speaking than what Thomas Henry Gill there and me does. Of course, we've not been used to being told that anybody was spiritual pastor over us—a minister, sir, is the paid servant of his congregation."

"If he is so weak-minded, so poor of spirit, as to allow himself to become so!" interjected Warwick.

"Theer weer a young minister as were here for a time before Mestur Robinson came," continued Mr. Hancock, still searching the ceiling, "as regarded me and Thomas Henry theer, and our respective good ladies, as fathers and mothers. The Reverend James Matthew Smedler his name was: he wouldn't ha' thowt, wouldn't have dreamed, o' doing a single thing wi'out our approval."

"Wouldn't he?" said Warwick. "Well, I'm

not going to ask your approval about anything that doesn't concern you. Now, as friends, and I hope good friends, I'll just take you into my confidence—but not as my deacons. Miss May and I intend to be married as soon as she is released from her duties at the school and I am free of my duty here. In order to put everything on a proper footing I have induced my aunt, Miss Warwick, a very clever woman who until recently was principal of a famous girls' college, to come and stay with Miss May as her guest until we can marry. You will therefore see that none of the conventions or proprieties will be outraged. My aunt will arrive to-morrow, and I shall be very happy to introduce her to you. You will find her a very charming woman and a very good woman; she has been a second mother to me, and I am very fond of her. And you will find that she will become very fond of the lady who is, please God, to become my wife."

Mr. Hancock and Mr. Gill looked at each other. Then they both shook hands with the young minister, very solemnly.

"Well, I'm sure, sir, nobody could speak no fairer," said Mr. Hancock; "and in that Mestur Gill there will agree heartily."

"Aye, I'm sure!" said Mr. Gill. "But ye know, Mestur Warwick, the ladies—well, the ladies is ladies. You know what women-kind is—Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill, sir, is that anxious that all should be done in decency and order, as the Good Book says, that they worrit theirsens—but, of course, as I say, sir, you know what women is."

"I'm certainly beginning to learn something about them," laughed Warwick. "But come, gentlemen, your glasses are empty. Help yourselves, and have another cigar. You were telling me about the agricultural show at Doncaster, Mr. Hancock, and about your success there?"

Going homeward that night Mr. Gill remarked to Mr. Hancock:

"That theer young man, Benjamin, is one of them 'at'll have his own way. I'd rather drive a skittish young filly nor try to drive him—he's a downrighter, he is!"

"I don't think you're far wrong, Thomas Henry," said Mr. Hancock. "No! Of course,' he continued, after a pause—"of course we dealt with him faithful—what?"

"Oh, aye!" replied Mr. Gill, chuckling. "We dealt wi' him very faithful."

Mrs. Hancock was awaiting Benjamin's

return. She was in her severest mood, and her knitting needles clicked rapidly.

"Well," said Mr. Hancock, as he seated himself in his easy chair and folded his hands over his waistcoat. "We dealt very faithful wi' the young man, Sarah Ellen, did me and Thomas Henry Gill. But he's a determined young feller—ye see, he's plenty o' brass o' his own—plenty! And he's gotten his aunt, a highly eddikated lady, to come and stay wi' the schoolmistress till the wedding can come off, and so of course there's no more to be said. The wilful man, Sarah Ellen, must have his own way!"

Mrs. Hancock laid by her knitting and went to bed in silence.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK

In making his arrangements for the observance of the conventions and the proprieties Warwick, like the innocent young man he was, omitted to take a highly important fact into account. He forgot that he was not living in London, but in Applemarney. Essentially a townsman, inexperienced in the subtleties and mysteries of village life, he had yet to learn that independence walks head erect in the city, but may not even slink around corners in the hamlet. It had seemed to his simple and eminently boyish mind that his action in introducing his aunt into the moral economy of Applemarney as chaperone to April May would meet the applause of Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock; in point of fact he could not have taken any step that could possibly have been more distasteful nor more aggravating to those worthy

women. Your true rustic resents nothing so much as the introduction of a foreign element into his particular sphere, unless that introduction is made at his own express desire. The stranger who steps within the jealously guarded preserves of a village community is, because of long centuries of usage and precedence, regarded with dislike and suspicion: it can only be after long years of jealous surveillance that the freedom of the place will be granted to him. This is a survival of the old tribal feeling; it exists to-day in our villages in a much deeper and wider sense than most people are aware of.

Warwick, accredited though he was, was himself a stranger in Applemarney: his aunt was a stranger introduced by a stranger. Now, the rural mind treats a stranger in two ways, and these separate modes of treatment depend entirely on the stranger's own conduct. If the stranger starts out by doing homage and doing it thoroughly, if he kow-tows, salaams, makes obeisance to the local gods, well and good. He will be—endured. He may even be, very condescendingly, patted on the back and asked to draw near to the hearth. He will, for a long time, be on trial, but abasement before the powers will have done much for him. But if

he steps within the circle as an equal, if he omits to cap such-an-one, forgets to give to each little deity his proper share of incense, let him look upon himself as worse off than a pariah dog in an Eastern city. He will be met with cold stares, chilly indifference; the walls of his house will be as glass, and his maidservant will find it in her interest to gather up all the crumbs of speech which fall around his tables.

Miss Warwick—strong, clever, witty, a woman of observation and humour—found herself at Applemarney in the position of the new dog who is pitchforked into the midst of a pack of sullen cows. Introduced by her childishly ingenuous nephew to the great folk of his congregation, she found herself met with an icy coldness, a freezing reserve, which at first amused her, but soon began to make her think. She found that nothing could wear this off. Mrs. Gill's and Mrs. Hancock's formal politeness possessed the qualities of granite; the bows with which Mr. Hancock and Mr. Gill, duly tutored by their wives, favoured her if they met her in highway or byway would have done honour to a monarch whose body moved, but whose soul was as stone within him. She was a stranger and a trespasser.

"These are queer people, my boy!" said Miss Warwick to her nephew. "I wonder sometimes if I have not gone back a few thousand years. Never mind! the little girl and I get on very well together, and Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock are at any rate worth studying. And we shall see what we shall see."

Ere autumn came there was more of a comedy being played upon this Arcadian stage than Miss Warwick had dreamed of seeing. It unfolded itself before her eyes with a certainty and an inevitableness which made it infinitely more fascinating that any drama of the theatre could be.

The renovation of the chapel was complete. The small army of workmen struck its tents and departed, chiefly to the sorrow of the young women, many of whom had found sweethearts, and to the regret of the landlord of the White Cow, who had never sold so much ale in one summer since the licence came into his hands. Influential members of the congregation, permitted to take a peep at the grandeurs of the restored and beautified temple, came away full of rapturous enthusiasm. The ceiling shone like ivory. The walls, from top to bottom, were apple-green in tint; the

chocolate dado was a triumph in art. Every inch of woodwork in the place had been repainted. On the wall behind the pulpit a text of Holy Scripture was emblazoned in red and gold and blue and silver. The pulpit itself was an imposing structure: a staircase led up to it on the right hand; a staircase led up to it on the left hand. The Good Book reposed on a rich cushion of crimson velvet, the four corners of which were decorated with heavy gold tassels. Beneath the pulpit, on a platform raised a little above the floor, stood a fine American organ, the vast peculiarity of which, in the opinion of most beholders, was that it possessed two keyboards. Along the aisles and round about the pulpit and the organ the flooring was covered with carpeting, so thick that, as Joseph Wright said, you could not feel the boards beneath it. All the doors were covered with curtains, and there were new blinds to all the windows.

"And for what you and me's done to this chappil, Mrs. Gill," said Mrs. Hancock, as she and her co-benefactress made a final inspection of the completed glories, "may those as we've done it for be thankful! But if theer's one thing that's true in this world, it is that theer's nowt so certain as ungratefulness for benefits

and mercies received, and I'm sure I expect naught at all from nobody."

"I could ha' wished that Mestur Robinson were back to perform the opening service," remarked Mrs. Gill. "It doesn't seem the proper thing 'at a stranger like this young man should have a glory which he can't make proper pretensions to. And between you and me, Mrs. Hancock, I think Mestur Warwick takes a good deal too much on hisself—I do!"

Mrs. Hancock shook the feathers and streamers of her bonnet.

"Wait a bit, Mrs. Gill," she said knowingly. "Mestur Warwick 'll not ride high-handed over us. There'll be a meeting to settle matters, and I shall have a word or two to say."

Mrs. Gill also intimated that she also would have a word to say at the meeting, and she and Mrs. Hancock thereupon went into committee upon certain points with a view of adopting and carrying out a definite policy. They went homeward well satisfied with each other.

The meeting whereat all matters connected with the reopening of the glorified chapel were to be settled was held in the schoolroom

a fortnight in advance of this great event—that fortnight, as Mr. Hancock said, being a useful interval wherein to allow the smell of fresh paint to evaporate and become less noticeable. It was a largely attended meeting; all the church members were present, and Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock, escorted by Maud Mary and Ruth, occupied the seats of honour in the front row. Warwick, as chairman, sat behind a table, with Mr. Hancock on his right hand and Mr. Gill on his left; at a smaller table, a little distance away, sat Joseph Wright, with a large minute book, a small ink bottle, and a sheaf of quill pens set out before him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Warwick, rising in the midst of a palpitating silence, "this is a meeting convened for the discussion of certain matters relating to the reopening of the chapel. It is already understood that the reopening is to take place on Sunday, October 21, and that on the previous evening there is to be a public meeting in the chapel. We are prepared to hear any suggestions which any of you care to make as to these events."

After a brief pause Mrs. Hancock rose to her feet.

"Mestur Warwick," she said, "I rise to make a proposal which I'm sure there's no one

i' this room will venture to gainsay. Them as does well by others ought to be well done to theirselves. We're all of us in this room deeply obligated to our friend, Mrs. Gill, for what she's done for us. Glad I am to hear that we're all in one mind as regards that theer! I wish to propose that, at the expense of the congregation, a brass plate should be prepared and affixed to the wall on the left-hand side of the pulpit, with a suitable inscription from which it may appear to them as reads it that the chappil was in the year 1898 repainted by Kate Eliza Gill of the Lowlands Farm."

Amidst a murmur of applause Mr. Hancock rose slowly and pulled down his waistcoat.

"I'm sure," he said, looking benignantly around him—"I'm sure it gives me the very heartiest and sincerest pleasure to second that there proposal. If any lady o' my acquaintance deserves to have her name written up in letters of brass, it's our good friend, Mrs. Gill, as has painted us up so smart that we look like an old clock with a new face. I'm sure it is the least we can do in the way of acknowledgment. Mrs. Gill's given a good deal of brass out of her pocket: now we must give her a bit of brass on the chapel wall."

A general acclamation brought Warwick to his feet.

"I think we may take it that that proposal is unanimously adopted," he said, and sat down again.

Mrs. Gill rose. She cast a meek glance around her.

"Mestur Warwick," she said, "while thanking others for honours conferred, however unworthy, it would not beseem me to forget for a moment that there is a person as deserves just as much honour as what I do. I refer to our good friend, Mrs. Hancock. It's what they call, I believe, a coincidence, Mestur Warwick; but when Mrs. Hancock rose to make that theer kind proposal as regards me, I was just about to rise and make a similar one about her! I desire to propose that at the expense of the congregation, a brass plate should be prepared and affixed to the wall on the right-hand side of the pulpit, with a suitable inscription from which it might appear to them as reads it in ages to come that the chapel was in the year 1898 completely carpeted, pulpited, and organed by Sarah Ellen Hancock."

Mr. Gill rose and imitated his fellow deacon by pulling down his waistcoat.

"I don't think I ever experienced more pleasure in my life than in seconding that there motion," he said. "It'll be a gratification to me to sit in my pew and see Mrs. Hancock's virtues set out on a brass plate. It'll be an example to them as comes later on to see that good lady's name placed in what one might call a conspicuous position. And as Mestur Hancock's just said, in relation to the other little matter, we shall only be giving Mrs. Hancock a bit of brass in return for the lump of brass Mrs. Hancock 's given us."

In the midst of more applause Warwick rose and said laconically:

"I think we may take it that that proposition also meets with unanimous approval."

When Joseph Wright had ostentatiously made a minute of the chairman's ruling, a man who seemed very ill at ease, and who read what he had to say from a scrap of paper, rose in the middle of the audience and piped out very hurriedly:

"I beg to propose that on the day of the reopening services the American organ be performed upon in the morning by Miss Maud Mary Gill and in the evening by Miss Ruth Hancock."

As this man sat down another man shot up,

ejected a few words fused into one, and dropped into his seat again as suddenly as he had risen.

"Ibegleavetosecondthattheerproposition!"

Warwick felt the colour mount to his face. This was a direct insult to April. He glanced at the proposer and seconder: one was Gill's, the other Hancock's foreman. He glanced at Mrs. Gill and at Mrs. Hancock; there was an evil smile in their eyes. And those eyes were watching him.

"Mestur Warwick!"

The carpenter had risen from the seat behind that in which Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock sat. A big, powerful man, with a loud voice, he instantly drew all eyes upon himself.

"Mestur Warwick, sir! I really don't understand however such a proposal as that to which we've just listened comes to be made. We hev' an organist already, sir; one as has allus given us great satisfaction, and a salaried organist an' all, and therefore, in a way of speaking, a professional performer. I've nowt to say agen either Miss Gill or Miss Hancock; they're both on them varry accomplished young ladies, I'm sure, and varry nice 'uns, too; but I'm certain sure, me being a member of the choir, 'at neyther on 'em can play the organ as well as what Miss May can, and——"

"And I wonder what right you have to speak, Reuben Naylor!" interrupted Mrs. Hancock angrily. "If you'd bowt the organ and paid for it as I hev' you'd happen have——"

Warwick rose to his feet with a stern "Order, order!"

"Mrs. Hancock," he said quietly, "Mr. Naylor is in possession of the meeting, and he must not be interrupted. Now, Mr. Naylor."

"Beggin' your pardon, Mrs. Hancock, ma'am," said the carpenter, "but I've as much right to speak in this meeting as what you have, and I've been a full church-member longer than you, or most here. I say that there's no need to ask anybody to play the organ so long as Miss May can play it, and I move that that theer proposal be not listened to."

There was a momentary silence, which was broken by Mr. Hancock, who got up with the smile of a man who feels no doubt whatever that he can immediately settle all difficulties.

"Of course," he said, with an indulgent wave of the hand towards Mr. Naylor—"of course, we all appreciate what our friend Reuben has said. But in this case, as these two good ladies has spent a deal of money on the chapel, why, of course, they naturally feel that a little respect is due to their feelings in the matter

I quite see your point, Reuben, my lad, but, ye see, them that pays the piper calls the tune. It's Mrs. Gill's and Mrs. Hancock's wish 'at their dowters should be the first to perform upon the American organ, and so there's nowt no more to be said."

"A' but, beggin' yeer pardon, Mestur Warwick, and yours, Mestur Hancock, theer's a deal more to be said," remarked a man who rose from a back seat. "I'm a full church-member, and my voice is as good as Mr. Hancock's, or Mr. Gill's, or anybody else's. I say 'at it'll be a shame and nowt less if Miss May is put aside i' that way. She's served us well. I beg to second what Mr. Naylor's said already."

"And I wonder who you are to put your word in!" exclaimed Mrs. Gill. "Will you have the goodness, Mestur Warwick, to keep these fellows quiet? I wonder how much the likes of them 'ud ever give to a new organ!"

Warwick rose, looking very stern.

"Under the rules of your trust-deed, a copy of which I have here," he said, "it is expressly provided that in the case of any dispute in the church body, the matter shall be put to the vote. It has been proposed by Mr. White and seconded by Mr. Haigh that Miss Gill and

Miss Hancock be asked to play the organ at the opening services. It has been proposed by Mr. Naylor and seconded by Mr. Dalby that Mr. White's proposal be not listened to. That is equivalent to moving the previous question. In the exercise of the authority given me by this trust-deed I ask those of you in favour of Mr. Naylor's motion to walk to the right of the room, and those against it to walk to the left."

He waited until the people, now excited and murmuring, had pushed and elbowed their way into opposite camps. A single glance told him how matters stood. The Gills and Hancocks were in a hopeless minority.

He turned to the two deacons.

"Will you count the numbers, gentlemen?" he said. "One check the other, please."

"I can't see what need there is," said Mr. Hancock, sullenly. "They're all on one side—anybody can see that."

Warwick tapped the trust-deed. The two deacons went slowly round the schoolroom, counting heads. Forty-two for Naylor's amendment: thirteen against.

"That is quite sufficient," said Warwick; "there is no need to divide again on the original motion. The organ will be played by Miss May as usual."

He was scarcely prepared for the outburst of applause which followed this announcement. What was interesting him more than anything at that moment was the fact that, when the division was taken, Ruth Hancock, after a momentary hesitation, had quitted her mother's side and gone over to the opposition.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RIVAL FACTIONS

To Warwick, the sight of Ruth Hancock standing at Naylor's side, bravely enduring the unconcealed wrath of her mother, the dark frown of her father, the curiosity of the crowd, seemed one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen in his life. He knew Ruth to possess a sweet and simple nature, and a soul that was all-pure; he knew also that she was as shy and retiring as a violet, and that it must have cost her an effort which no one could comprehend to take this decisive, public step. Yet as he looked at her he saw the calm peace in her eyes which is only seen in the eyes of those who take some great step at the cost of vast suffering to themselves, and he knew that in her heart she was already feeling that she had done right. He saw the carpenter pat her on the shoulder and whisper

something to her; he saw her turn wistfully to the man's rough, bearded face, full of sympathy for her, and he recognised the whole tragedy of Ruth's life: she was a lonely spirit seeking love in the midst of uncongenial environment. Yet how bravely and uncomplainingly she bore herself! Never, he thought, had such a sermon been preached to him as she had preached in this one simple action, wherein she had disobeyed her parents rather than do an unjust thing.

The buzz of excitement was clearing: the people were resuming their seats. Warwick, assuming a cheerful demeanour for the purpose of cloaking a sad heart, rose to his feet again.

"Now there are one or two matters which we must settle," he said. "And then I daresay we shall be glad to get home."

"And the very best 'place we could all be in, I think, Mestur Warwick!" exclaimed Mrs. Hancock, who was 'settling her mantle, and preserving a distance between herself and her daughter. "An' the place where most of them as is here ought to have stayed! The idea! Me and Mrs. Gill theer laying out good money as if it were water and then to be contradicted and browbeaten and treated as if we were

so much dirt in the street—and me insulted to my very face by them as owt to be ashamed o' theirselves! Home! I should think it were time we went home!"

"Well, we shall get there all the sooner, Mrs. Hancock, if you will just hear what I have to say," said Warwick pleasantly. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, first of all, do you wish me to vacate the pulpit at the opening services and find you a special preacher? If you do, out with it! I am entirely in your hands. It is customary, I know, at these times to ask some well-known man to preach. Perhaps Mr. Hancock or Mr. Gill may have some famous name in mind—something to suggest?"

Mr. Hancock shook his head solemnly. His face betrayed more feeling—of an unpleasant sort—than Warwick had ever seen on it before.

"Nay," he said, "after what's taken place, Mestur Warwick, I think the less I say the better. It wo'd appear that anything said by me and mine has no weight wi' them as should know better nor to set theirselves up again their betters. So I shall say nowt at all, sir."

"Mr. Gill, then," said Warwick, turning to the junior deacon.

But Mr. Gill also shook his head. He gazed hard at the ceiling.

"Nay!" he said; "I don't know as I've owt to say, Mestur Warwick. I'm a good deal o' Mestur Hancock's opinion. Least said, soonest mended."

Warwick turned to the general body of the meeting with a look of inquiry. Reuben Naylor arose, glancing around him.

"I think it 'ud be a poor return to Mestur Warwick, seein' 'at he's served us very well i' Mestur Robi'son's absence, if we put him on one side at a time like this," he said. "It seems to me 'at theer's no need to go farther afield. I believe 'at all friends present 'ud raythe hear Mestur Warwick nor anybody."

"Aye!" "Right enough, is that!" "Reuben's right!" "No need for anybody from outside!"—these exclamations came in ready chorus from all parts of the room. And the Gills and Hancocks hearing them, and knowing the folk from whom they came, knew that the young minister was stronger than they, and took a new dislike to him.

"I think that's what ye might call the unanimous spirit o' the meetin', Mestur Warwick," said Reuben Naylor. "We shall all be very well satisfied wi' you, sir."

Warwick uttered a few words of sincere gratitude, and said how much he desired that nothing but friendship and good will and toleration and charity should exist amongst them, if only for the sake of their absent pastor. Mrs. Hancock, who for several minutes had been fanning herself energetically with her pocket-handkerchief, groaned loudly.

"An' a blessed thing it is, an' all, 'at poor Mestur Robi'son isn't here to see what Mrs. Gill and me's endured this night!" she burst out. "It 'ud mek' a dead man turn i' his grave, if he had any conscience left in him, to see the way 'at we've been thraypsed and contradicted and put upon!"

"Aye, I'm sure!" exclaimed Mrs. Gill. "How people that fall to be beholden to you can——"

"Order, if you please," said Warwick; "I believe I am still in possession. There is now only one question to settle: when it is settled, we will adjourn. That is the question of the chairmanship of the meeting which we propose to hold on the night before the opening service. I shall be glad if some one will make a proposal."

There was a dead silence for some minutes. Mr. Hancock, assuming a fine air of entire

innocence, fixed his eye upon a large chart, whereon were depicted whales, lions, tigers, bears, ostriches, and other beasts and birds, and became to all appearances absorbed in it; Mr. Gill, picking up the copy of the trust-deed from the chairman's table, took great interest in turning over its pages; Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock, keeping their eyes carefully averted from each other, became suddenly pensive and thoughtful.

"Something," said Warwick to himself as he watched the principal actors keenly—"something is going to happen."

Mrs. Hancock suddenly rose. Her manner was bland, suave. She smiled graciously upon Warwick.

"Why, of course, as to that theer question, Mestur Warwick," she said in dulcet tones, "of course there can't be two ways about it, as I'm sure everybody in this meeting will agree. As the senior deacon of the chapel, and as the principal person in the village, Mestur Benjamin Hancock, of the Manor Farm, is the proper gentleman to okkypy the chair on the occasion you refer to."

"Begging your pardon, Mrs. Hancock," said Mrs. Gill, rising to her feet and showing several signs of indignation—"begging your

pardon, I say, but them's remarks which I cannot allow to be made i' my presence. I've naught to say as to whether Mestur Hancock's the principal deacon or no, but I do know that our farm's a good fifty acres bigger nor what yours is, and that we pay bigger rent and rates than what you do. And since it were me that started the movement for the repairing of the chappil, and had done more for it than anybody else, it's only a right and proper thing that the chair should be taken by my husband, Mestur Thomas Henry Gill, as has more right to be called the leading person in the village than anybody."

"Well, as to your doing more to the chappil, Mrs. Gill, nor what I have!" exclaimed Mrs. Hancock, "I don't know how you can stand theer on your own feet and say such a thing. I'm quite sure that painting the walls green, and ornamenting them with a cockolate day-doe, and having a text picked out on the back wall i' blues and yallers, has none cost you what carpeting, and pulpiting, and American organing the place has cost me!"

Mrs. Gill tossed her head, and smiled loftily.

"I hev' my bills, Mrs. Hancock," she said; "an' they're receipted, an' all."

"Aye, an' I hev' my bills, and they're all receipted, too, Mrs. Gill," retorted Mrs. Hancock. "I'll show my bills against yours any day!"

Warwick, feeling utter contempt for the two men who flanked him, rose to his feet.

"Come, ladies, ladies!" he said admonishingly, "this is unseemly behaviour. Besides, we shall never get on with our business if we condescend to personalities. Cannot we come to some agreement? Mr. Hancock, have you nothing to suggest?"

Mr. Hancock drew his eyes away from the whale and yawned cavernously.

"Nay, sir," he said, "I should prefer things to take their course. It appears that there's them i' this room as will hev' their own way, and I'm none one to force myself forward. All the same, I'm very well aweer of the amount of money which my wife's laid out in carpetin', and pulpitin', and American organin' t' chapel, and so is Thomas Henry Gill theer."

"Aye, an' I know what my wife's laid out in paintin' and whitewashin'," said Mr. Gill. "You can't hev' a regiment of whitewashers and painters and sich-like hangin' about a place all that time for nowt!"

"Will no one make some suggestion?" asked Warwick in desperation.

Joseph Wright rose from the seat of the recording angel.

"Bein' a member o' the church," he said, "however humble a one, I believe I'm entitled to say summat. Mestur Reverend Chairman: how wo'd it be if Mestur Hancock and Mestur Gill both wor chairmen? One to sit on t' right hand, an' t' other on t' left hand? When one were stalled o' t' job, t' other could start on. I'm shewre it would be a varry sensible way out o' t' difficulty—something like a caufe wi' two heads."

When the laughter had subsided and Joseph had resumed his seat and his quill pen, Reuben Naylor, rose, smiling.

"I think, as a body, we should be like a caufe wi' two heads if we wor to adopt Joseph's suggestion," he said. "Ye can't have two folks sittin' on one stool, Joseph—at least not comfortable. I'm sure it's a great pity 'at this here difficulty's arisen. We could all ha' been happy and content under either Mestur Hancock or Mestur Gill. We're more obligated to Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock nor what, I think, they reckon on, and we're showin' our gratitude in brass plates. But we're bound

to get over the difficulty about t' chair. I believe 'at I'm doin' the best thing when I propose that the chair be taken by Mestur Warwick."

Three or four men sprang up in their seats. One got his words in first—in a stream.

"Isecondthatpropositionhearty!"

Reuben Naylor raised his head and looked round the meeting.

"All 'at's in favour of Mestur Warwick," he said.

When the applause had died out, Warwick spoke briefly and firmly. Since they wished him to occupy the chair, he would do so, he said, in the interests of peace. Then he made a fervent appeal to all to put aside all personal feeling and considerations, and to avoid narrow jealousies. But he knew as he spoke that upon the rival factions his words had no effect.

"And now let us all go home determined upon being good friends," he concluded; "don't let us think of our individual likes and dislikes, but of the general good of the community."

Mr. Hancock rose slowly to his feet.

"Wi' all due respect to you, Mestur War-

wick," he said, with a perceptible sneer—"and, of course, a man o' my age ought to show a deal o' respect to a man o' yours, as is little more than a lad—I think 'at if you'd said less about general good and a bit more about showin' respect where it's due, it 'ud ha' been better. I consider," continued Mr. Hancock, raising his voice—"I consider that the conduct o' this here meetin' has been shameful! A more ungrateful set o' people I never heerd on. Howsumiver, them as has money and power isn't to be lightly putten down. It's too late now for Mrs. Gill to stop t' paintin', and she can't tek it off the walls, but I shall advise my wife to remove all that theer carpetin', and the American organ, and the pulpit, as is her lawful property. Ye've nowt but yourselves to thank for it," concluded Mr. Hancock, waving his arms at his fellow members; "nowt but yersens. All 'at my wife's bowt I shall have removed out o' t' chappil, an' ye can buy a new pulpit, and a new organ, and new carpetin' for yersens—if ye can raise the money!"

Warwick rose to his feet, smiling.

"Come, come, Mr. Hancock," he said deprecatingly: "you are alarming some of our friends. Besides, you forget that you have

no power to lay a finger on anything in the chapel."

"No power to lay a finger on property bowt wi' my wife's money!" exclaimed Mr. Hancock. "Oh, indeed! We'll see about that, sir. What my wife's paid for is my wife's property, Mestur Warwick, as you shall find out!"

"No," said Warwick, "you're quite wrong. Nothing that Mrs. Hancock has given to the chapel is her property. It never was yours."

Mr. Hancock stared at the young minister with widening eyes and a mouth that refused to be shut.

"What!" he exclaimed, "do you mean to tell me that——"

"I mean to remind you, Mr. Hancock, that Mrs. Hancock a fortnight ago executed in your presence a formal deed of gift of all these things to the trustees of the chapel, of whom you are one and Mr. Gill another. Neither you nor Mrs. Hancock can now remove or interfere with any of Mrs. Hancock's gifts in any way whatever."

Mr. Hancock seized his hat. He strode down from the little platform on which the chairman's table stood and approached his wife and daughter.

"Come away home!" he commanded, "come away home!"

He pushed his way towards the door, closely followed by Mrs. Hancock. Neither said a word of farewell to Warwick, but Ruth, as she turned away, looked sorrowfully at him. He smiled encouragingly at her, wishing that he could thank her there and then for the bravery for which he knew she would have to suffer.

The Gills followed the example of the Hancocks. Warwick was left alone on the platform. He dismissed the meeting without further comment.

"Ye've done it now, parson!" said Joseph Wright, when he and Warwick were left alone in the schoolroom. "Or, reyther, ye hev'n't done it, but ye'll get all t' blame on it. Well, I allus knew at it 'ud come to summat of this sort. Ye can't ride rough shod ower people for iver and iver. Gow, he can look black, can yon Benjamin Hancock when he doesn't get his own way, can't a? But t' wimmen! eh, dear, dear, they'll ne'er forgi'e this night as long as they live."

"It is all very sad and very pitiable," said Warwick, who felt sick at heart. "And I suppose it is not all over yet."

"Not by a long chalk, parson," said Joseph,

promptly. "Don't you mek no mistak'! When black blood's raised i' folk like t' Gills and t' Hancocks, it'll none be settled in a hurry. They'll ne'er rest until they've had their revenge, if they hev' to wait ten year for it. Ye'll see, sir."

But in spite of Joseph's warning Warwick was not prepared for the events which followed that distasteful and unpleasant evening in the schoolroom. During the next two weeks the atmosphere was calm—outwardly. The commemorative brass tablets were duly affixed to the walls and much admired by those who came to see them. But no member of the Gill family, no member of the Hancock family, came within the chapel precincts.

Nor was any Gill or any Hancock—not even poor Ruth—present at the reopening ceremony. The renovated chapel was crowded, but the front pew was deserted. And presently it was discovered that the American organ was securely locked and the key in Mrs. Hancock's possession. Warwick sent a boy on a bicycle to the Manor Farm to ask for it: the boy returned to pant out a message before the whole congregation.

"Mistress Hancock says 'at as ye can do wi'out her ye can do wi'out music an' all!"

Warwick frowned, smiled, finally laughed. He turned to the caretaker.

"Joseph," he said, "fetch me a chisel and a hammer. It seems that we shall be under the necessity of breaking a lock!"

CHAPTER XVII

WAR

Warwick's action in breaking open the American organ which Mrs. Hancock had locked up securely against all comers served as a coping stone to the undesirable edifice of disaffection and internecine strife which had been gradually arising in Applemarney ever since that lady and Mrs. Gill initiated their joint movement towards the restoration of the chapel and the furtherance of their own grandeur. Witnessed by a crowded assemblage of the faithful, and noised abroad by each individual member of it ere the night was over, it was taken as a direct act of defiance towards personages who until that time had been all-powerful. That any human being, minister or no minister, should have dared thus to throw down a challenge to the mistress of the Manor Farm, seemed to the little world

of Applemarney a matter of much more importance than an insult paid by one of the smaller powers of Europe to one of the greater. In the White Cow, around the parish pump, at the door of the village shop, on the thresholds of cottages, men and women spoke with bated breath of the young minister's temerity. It was as if some daring iconoclast, breaking in upon the coronation of a king, had snatched the sceptre from the monarch's hand and broken it in halves in the anointed presence.

When Mr. Hancock, waving the carpenter aside with lordly indulgence and contempt, had remarked that those who pay the piper have a right to call the tune, he had struck a note of rustic nature to which Warwick, by temperament and education, was unable to respond, and not at all capable of understanding. The folk of Applemarney knew nothing of subtleties in the matter of legal possession; that Mrs. Hancock had executed a formal deed of gift in the various properties which she had placed in the chapel mattered nothing to them; the vast, compelling, pertinent fact in their minds was that it was Mrs. Hancock's "brass"—good, sound, ringing English money—which had bought these things. Nor were they concerned with the equitable

and moral rights of the matter. Since Mrs. Hancock had "wared her brass" in the American organ, the American organ must be regarded always as Mrs. Hancock's very particular property—in the opinion of everybody, save the village philosopher (who, naturally, was also the village ne'er-do-weel), and despite all that that deep thinker and great reader (of the local newspaper) could urge.

"Ye're nowt but a pack o' fools!" said this great man, sitting amongst an assemblage of village patriarchs and wiseacres in the kitchen of the White Cow; "t' young minister wor reight in all he said. Mistress Hancock executed—that's a legal phraseology signifyin' 'at she gave and presented and donated for iver and iver to t' chappil—executed, I say, what they term a deed of gift, whereby shoo made ower to t' chappil, all and sundry o' them carpets, and t' American organ, and t' new pulpit, and all the appurtenances thereof. As soon as Mistress Hancock put her name to that theer paper them things wor her property no longer—they becam' t' property o' t' chappil. That's t' law."

Amidst a silence redolent of more or less impolite unbelief, a voice piped out from the chimney corner:

"A', but whose brass wor it at paid for t' things?"

"Why, it wor Mistress Hancock's brass."

"Then if it wor Mistress Hancock's brass, t' things is Mistress Hancock's. Ye'm noan bahn to tell me 'at if anybody ligs their brass out on a 'Merican organ 'at t' 'Merican organ doesn't belong to them."

"How could t' thing belong to Mistress Hancock when shood gi'en it away to som'dy else?" demanded the man of learning, indignantly.

"Ne'er mind. I know as much as thou does, if thou does read t' newspaper all t' day long. Mistress Hancock bowt t' 'Merican organ, and shoo has t' sattled note for it, an' all," said the stubborn critic.

"An' shoo didn't ware her brass i' t' thing wi' t' intention o' hevin' it rived oppen wi' a chisel an' a hammer," said another member of the company. "They tell me 'at t' parson brak t' lock clean i' two!"

"All t' same," remarked somebody else, 'i'm noan sorry 'at t' parson did what he did. T' Hancocks and t' Gills has had ower much o' their own way i' this place, an' it wor time 'at they were taken down a bit."

"Aye, aye!" agreed the philospher's stern critic. "I've nowt to say agen that theer. I'm shewre I admire t' young man for brekkin' t' thing oppen: it shows 'at he has some sperrit. But all t' same it wor Mistress Hancock's brass 'at paid for t' instrument. There's noa gettin' away fro' that theer."

"No!" said another wiseacre. "No! it's reight, is that. No matter whativer pieces o' paper Mistress Hancock put her hand to, t' fact remains 'at shoo bowt t' organ. It wor *her* brass."

The magnitude of this all-important fact was laid before Warwick by no less an authority than Elizabeth Wright on the Monday morning which followed the reopening services. Bringing his breakfast into the parlour she waited until Warwick had seated himself, and then addressed him with unwonted seriousness.

"There's a word I mun say to you, Mestur Warwick," she said, shaking the horns of her headdress. "Ye know, although ye are a minister, ye're nowt but a lad, and ye've no mother alive, and of course I hev'n't seen enough o' yer auntie to know whether shoo's a sensible woman or no, so it's borne in on me 'at I mun speak plain to you."

"I shall be very glad to hear anything you have to say, Elizabeth," said Warwick meekly. "What is it?"

"Well, you know, as I say, ye're nowt but a lad, and in some ways ye're nowt but a bairn," said Elizabeth with sublime candour. "I will say this: ye've never given me no trouble; you've never made no complaints about my cookin' nor nowt—not 'at ye ever had reason to, for ye'll not find a better plain cook nor what I am 'twixt here and t' North Pole, but, of course, there's some folk 'ud grummle if they dined wi' the King hisself. But, I wor sayin', ye're young, and ye're a stranger, and ye don't know these folk as me an' our Joä does, and ye owt to be warned. Ye'll ha' some trouble here, Mestur Warwick."

"Do you think so, Elizabeth?"

"I don't think nowt about it," replied Elizabeth; "I'm shewre on it. Ye're that young, ye know, mestur, 'at ye don't understand women. Has nobody ever ta'en the trouble to tell you 'at ye'd better heng a millstone round your neck and go an' throw yersen into t' nearest watter than affront a woman like yon theer Mistress Hăncock? Shoo'll ne'er forgive ye as long as ever shoo's a breath left in her body."

"I did what I felt—and knew—to be right, Elizabeth," said Warwick.

"Happen so," said Elizabeth. "But if I know owt o' t' world it varry often happens 'at doin' what's reight leads to doin' a good deal 'at's wrong. I've nowt to say at all about what ye did i' brekkin' t' musical instrument oppen, but ye see it wor Mistress Hancock's brass 'at paid for it, an' Mistress Hancock 'll consider that theer instryment her property. Ye'll ha' trouble wi' her, mestur."

"But——" began Warwick.

"Ho'd yer noise a bit, now," commanded Elizabeth. "Ye don't know these folk as I do. Now, ye'd notice 'at theer were noa Hancocks nor yet Gills at chappil yesterday; noa, nor there weern't be while you're here. They're that proud and stiffnecked is them theer 'at they'll bend to noabody. An' as I've telled ye, they'll mek' trouble. Ha' ye niver heerd, Mestur Warwick, 'at a Yorkshireman 'll carry a stone i' his pocket for ten year, and then turn it ower, and for another ten year after that, and turn it ower again, but he'll fling it i' t' end."

"That's not the sort of spirit you expect to find in Christians!" exclaimed Warwick bitterly.

Elizabeth Wright sniffed.

"Christians!" she said. "There's a deal more Christians 'at never goes to t' chappils and chu'ches nor ye can find inside 'em! Christians! Don't ye expect to find much Christianity in an angry woman, Mestur Warwick, 'cause ye weern't. I'd rayther face a Bombay tiger, whatever that may be, nor a woman like Sarah Ellen Hancock when shoo's gotten her back up! An' don't you mek' no mistake—the Gills 'll side wi' t' Hancocks."

"Will they?" said Warwick.

"They will so!" affirmed Elizabeth. "If it had been nowt but a question o' that theer chairmanship, t' Gills and t' Hancocks 'ud ha' fowt each other like cats and dogs! But now 'at you've sort of defied both on 'em they'll side wi' each other, and they'll have their knives into you whenever t' chance comes. It'll be nowt but war; they'll keep quiet till they see a chance, an' then ye'll catch it! Me and our Joä, we wor talking about it last night—he's a sensible man is our Joä when he isn't on t' rant—and he agreed wi' all 'at I said. There'll be trouble."

"Well, I must try and bear it," said Warwick. "After all, we can't expect to get through the world without trouble, Elizabeth."

"Well, it'll come," asseverated Elizabeth. "Ye'll see. But there's one thing 'at ye mon't do—ye mon't let it affect yer appetite. It's poor work facin' trouble wi' an empty belly. I gotten a nice fat chicken for yer dinner to-day, and I'm bahn to roast it wi' a few o' slices o' crisp bacon, and there'll be a green-gage tart an' all, so ye'd better go for yer Monday mornin' walk and come back sharp set; ye'll care for neyther Gills nor Hancocks wi' that theer chicken under yer belt!"

Warwick cared little for either Hancocks or Gills, but he cared much for the peace of the community of which he was in charge. He found as the weeks went by that Elizabeth Wright's prediction as to the procedure of the two families was being fulfilled to the letter. The front pew remained unoccupied Sunday after Sunday. The newly decorated temple, the fine pulpit, the thick carpeting, the American organ, were gazed upon by many eyes, but never graced by the presence of the inmates of the Manor Farm and the Lowlands.

Warwick, after much searching of heart, much consultation with his aunt, could find no reason why he should approach the malcontents. For some time he saw nothing of

them. But at last, meeting Mr. Hancock on the highroad one November afternoon, he stopped the senior deacon, who would otherwise have passed on with no more than a nod. Mr. Hancock regarded him coldly.

"Mr. Hancock," said Warwick, "it is my duty to tell you that you are neglecting your duty in absenting yourself from public worship."

Mr. Hancock's lips curved themselves into a dry smile and his jaws began to work as if on some invisible morsel of food.

"Indeed, sir," he said satirically. "Well, of course, it's a very cheap thing, is tellin' other folks what their duty is. While I feel disposed to bide away from the chappil, Mestur Warwick, I shall bide away. I don't know," continued Mr. Hancock, meditatively stroking his horse's neck—"I don't know as there's owt very attractive about chappil-going at present. Happen there may be when a gentleman like Mestur Robi'son returns."

"You are doing me a great injustice," said Warwick.

Mr. Hancock smiled—smiled as he might have smiled over the recollection of eating a sour apple.

"If there's owt to be said about injustice,"

he remarked loftily, "I think it owt to be said by me and my wife, Mrs. Hancock, and by Mestur and Mrs. Gill. Of course, however, we're nowt—nowt but poor uneddikated Yorkshire folk as does a deal for t' chappil out o' good nature and has their kindness flung back in their faces. Injustice! Deary, deary me!"

"Mr. Hancock," said Warwick, "does it ever strike you that there are always two sides to a question?"

Mr. Hancock inclined his head to the right, gazing at life and the world over his horse's right ear. Then he inclined it to the left, and considered the same difficult problems over the horse's left ear.

"It's allus struck me 'at there's a right side to every question, Mestur Warwick," he answered with suave diplomacy. "Oh, yes, sir!"

"And I suppose you think you're absolutely right in this, eh?" said Warwick.

Mr. Hancock chewed more invisible food and let his eyes roam over the mist-laden fields through which the highroad ran in a monotonously straight line.

"Noe, sir, noe!" he said with slow intonation. "I weern't presume to argue wi' a London

young gentleman like yourself. Mestur Robi'-son is a Yorkshireman."

Warwick laughed.

"It's my opinion that if Mr. Robinson were home again he would give you a sound rating!" he said. "You know very well that you're setting a very bad example and neglecting your duty shamefully: you know it!"

Mr. Hancock's sombre eyes suddenly flared up; he slapped his gaitered leg fiercely with his ash-plant switch.

"An' I'm settin' a bad example and neglecting my duty shameful, am I!" he exclaimed with evident temper. "Oh, indeed! An' I wonder who's setten' a bad example iver sin' he came into t' village, raisin' folk up to go agen their betters, an' creatin' scandal wi'——"

"Good day, Mr. Hancock!" said Warwick, moving off.

"An' good day to you, mi lad!" said Mr. Hancock. "And mind what ye are about while ye are here. Ye may hev' some brass o' yer own, but there's them as has brass besides you."

Warwick walked on with the farmer's words tingling in his ears: "Ye may hev' brass o' yer own!" Did they really think that in the mere fact that he happened to possess a

comfortable private income lay the secret of the independence he had shown in his dealings with them—did they? Then he began to wonder how they knew of this—he was honestly certain he had never given any one of them a hint of it in any way. Stay; yes, he had given a good deal to the poor folk, given it openly, without any thought that it might provoke criticism, given it where he had seen need of it.

"Perhaps I am lacking in common sense, lacking in tact," he said to himself, as he stamped along the wet road. "Perhaps I'm too impulsive. And yet, God knows, I've never done a thing since I came here that I didn't feel to be the right thing to do."

It was his custom to go over to the schoolhouse every evening and spend an hour or two with his aunt and April: he went that night, feeling in need of some comfort. And there he encountered one of those strange passages in human life which prove to men and women who can see that, however much a human soul is in need of consolation, there is always, somewhere, some other sister soul that is in need of still more.

Ruth Hancock was with Miss Warwick and April. Warwick greeted her warmly; it was

on the tip of his tongue to thank her for her brave action at the eventful meeting, but something in her face bade him refrain. She remained but a few minutes after his arrival; then rose, saying that she must go. Warwick offered to walk back to the Manor Farm with her; insisted on doing so; she thanked him earnestly, but let him see that she did not wish it. When she had gone, he looked inquiringly at his aunt and at April.

"Ruth Hancock seems—is it unhappy?" he said.

"It is not very likely she could be happy—after what happened," said April.

"You mean that her father and mother have been very angry?" he asked.

"She means that Ruth is very unlike her father and mother," said Miss Warwick sharply. "Dear me, John, you are dense in some things."

"Yes," said Warwick, "I believe I am. But—how could anybody be angry with a good, sincere, womanly girl like Ruth?"

Miss Warwick gave her nephew a queer look which ended in a smile.

"You've a lot to learn yet, my boy," she said.

He was to learn a great deal more very quickly. A few days after that evening visit

to the schoolhouse he went home one afternoon to find a visitor—the old, greatly respected minister of St. Quentin's. In the figure of this venerable man, noted for his benevolence and goodness, there was nothing to warn Warwick that he was looking upon the messenger of that trouble which Our Bet had foretold.

CHAPTER XVIII

"AND WOMEN'S SLANDER IS THE WORST"

SECRETLY wondering what brought the old minister to see him, Warwick proceeded to give his guest a hearty welcome and to offer him instant hospitality. It appeared, however, that Mr. Mortimer had been waiting some little time at the chapel-house, having driven over from St. Quentin's early in the afternoon, and Elizabeth Wright had already made him a cup of tea. He exhibited a certain amount of anxiety to explain his presence.

"You are wondering what has brought me here, Mr. Warwick," he said, when he and the younger minister had retired to the study, "especially seeing that this is the first time I have visited you since you came into my neighbourhood. It is the first time, indeed, that I have been in Applemarney for some years: I am getting an old man, and cannot

get about as freely as I did once upon a time."

"I suppose you have come out to see our renovated and glorified chapel, Mr. Mortimer," replied Warwick. "We have been having quite a time with painters and carpenters and workmen of all sorts. You will see an improvement since you were here last."

"No," said the old man. "At my age I shouldn't drive seven miles on a raw November afternoon to look at a few coats of new paint and a new pulpit and organ. No; I wish my errand had been of no more importance than that, Mr. Warwick. Now we will go straight to the point. You know, of course, that I am chairman of our district union? Yes; well, naturally, a great many complaints, well-founded and ill-founded, reach my ears. People appeal to me about many things. Very often they do so without cause—a great many men and women speak without due reflection or thought."

"I understand from that," said Warwick, "that you have had some complaint laid against me."

Mr. Mortimer produced a pair of spectacles from one pocket and two letters from another.

"Mr. Warwick," he said, as he polished his

spectacles, "I will tell you plainly that I have received two letters from prominent members of the congregation here—one Mrs. Hancock, the other Mrs. Gill—which have given me more pain than anything I have ever read, or known of, in all my career as a minister. Similar letters were simultaneously received by Mr. James, our secretary. He would have come with me to-day to see you on this matter, but he has been obliged to go away on important business. I came, Mr. Warwick, because I felt that it is such a serious affair that it must be taken in hand at once."

Warwick was thinking of the prophecies of Joseph and Elizabeth Wright. He comprehended, in some vague fashion, that the prophecies were coming true; but he had no exact conception of the way in which they were to be fulfilled.

"Yes?" he said. "And yet, Mr. Mortimer, as between man and man, I tell you honestly that I have done my duty here. I cannot think of anything in which I could justly be blamed."

The old minister, who had just put on his spectacles, took them off again, and looked at his younger brother with a kindly glance.

'You have had troublous times," he said.

"And, I am afraid, have made enemies of the Hancocks and Gills."

"Not with intention," replied Warwick. "That there is disaffection I cannot deny. But, as I have said already, I cannot think that it has been of my causing. I wish, sir, before we go further, that you would let me tell you the whole history of the matter."

"That," said Mr. Mortimer, "is exactly what I want you to do."

Warwick narrated the entire story of the movement for the renovation of the chapel —how it was initiated by Mrs. Gill, taken up by Mrs. Hancock, carried to completion by the two. He told of the fateful meeting in the schoolroom: of the events which then happened: of the split between the Gills and the Hancocks over the question of the chairmanship: of their coalition against himself: of his forcing the lock of the American organ. Sometimes the old minister shook his head, sometimes he sighed, sometimes he burst into laughter.

"Yes, yes!" he said, when Warwick had made an end. "I understand it all exactly. I know these people better than you do, my son. It is all due to the same evil, wretched old cause—Ignorance. Primarily, Mrs. Gill

and Mrs. Hancock are good women. They are excellent wives—for their particular husbands—excellent managers, excellent mistresses of their households. They would not cheat, rob, nor steal. They have an inflexible standard of their own from which neither flame nor flood could force them to deviate. But they are ignorant, narrow-minded, spiteful, vindictive, mean of spirit, always ready to judge. As I say, I know them—and their type. I put all these failings, this want of charity, this lack of perception, this foolish setting of themselves up as judges and patterns, to ignorance—ignorance, the greatest, most awful curse of mankind!"

Warwick made no reply. The old minister presently continued.

"If this sort of woman knew better, if she were not—to put the matter in its mildest way—an ignorant savage, she would not show the tendency to tear and rend which she so invariably shows when her primitive, her elementary instincts are offended. But being what she is——" He lifted his hands in despair and shook his head.

"I have had so many instances of this sort of thing," he said slowly. "It makes an old man very weary, and sometimes—yes, I am afraid it

is true—sometimes a little doubtful whether all the most earnest endeavours, the highest examples can stamp this terrible lack of charity out of human beings. A time will no doubt come when moral murder will be looked upon with as much detestation as physical murder is now—I shall not see it. I only hope and trust that my grandchildren may."

Warwick still made no observation on the old man's remarks. He waited, wondering. At last, after a long silence, during which he had appeared to be lost in thoughts of his own, Mr. Mortimer once more put on his spectacles and held up the letters which he had drawn from his pocket.

"These letters, Mr. Warwick," he said; "I told you that one is from Mrs. Gill, the other from Mrs. Hancock. They are of a serious nature; they will give you intense pain; they will cause intense pain to—another. Yet you will have to face them bravely."

Warwick heard this with throbbing pulses. What was coming? He knew of no charge which these women could make against himself that could give him pain; what then was it that the old minister hinted at?

"Since you came here you have become engaged to be married, Mr. Warwick,"

continued Mr. Mortimer. "Engaged to the young lady who is in charge of the school—Miss May."

"Yes, sir," replied Warwick.

"You have every confidence, every belief in her?"

"The most profound belief and confidence!" answered Warwick.

"I have met Miss May now and then," said Mr. Mortimer musingly; "and she has visited my home in company with Mr. Robinson, who, I know, thinks very highly of her. She has always impressed me as a frank, straightforward young woman, with a decided character of her own—a character which not all people would readily understand. I will tell you at once, my son, that if Miss May gave me her word upon any question which it was absolutely necessary to put to her, I should believe her to the full, without doubt or reservation."

"Thank you, sir," said Warwick, fervently; "thank you!"

"That knowledge will perhaps help you to bear what I have to tell you," the old minister went on. "It must needs wound you to hear it, but it is unavoidable. These letters contain grave charges against Miss May."

"Grave charges!"

"The gravest of charges. It is my belief," said Mr. Mortimer, "that the letters are part of a concerted plan of action, though on the face of them they are written independently. In each there is, as I say, the gravest of charges."

"In God's name, sir!" exclaimed Warwick, "what is it that these women allege against her?"

"They say that she is not a fit and proper person to have charge of the school; that her conduct since coming to the village has not been consistent with propriety; and that she has exposed herself to scandal," answered Mr. Mortimer. "And—now this, of course, is the serious part of it, the very serious part of it—Mrs. Gill says, positively and definitely, that she has absolute proof, which she can produce at a proper time, that Miss May has been guilty of misconduct; Mrs. Hancock, in almost similar terms, makes the same charge. And in both cases the name of the man is given—young Beverley, who, as you perhaps know, was until recently a veterinary surgeon at St. Quentin's."

Warwick sat staring at the old minister in dumb agony of mind. There was not a shadow

of suspicion, of doubt, in his heart; he only saw the cruelty, the vindictive meanness of the women who could so basely revenge themselves upon him by killing the honour of the woman he loved. Could such vileness exist, he was asking himself over and over again—exist amongst—amongst—women?

"I know young Beverley," he heard Mr. Mortimer saying, at what seemed to be a mighty distance. "He and my son Philip were great friends during the three years which Beverley spent in St. Quentin's. He often spent an evening at my house. I tell you plainly, Mr. Warwick, that quite apart from Miss May, I would no more believe this charge against Beverley than I would believe a charge against my own wife. I had many opportunities of judging him, and I believe him to be incapable of doing anything to injure a young woman. He is a lively spirited, vivacious, fun-loving young fellow; but, I am sure, clean-minded and clean-hearted. This charge, of course, is as much against him as against her."

Warwick had risen and was walking up and down the room. As yet, he was scarcely able to realise the full meaning of the old minister's statements.

"But what can have led these women to make these charges?" he burst out at last. "It is abominable—cruel—wicked!"

"The probability is," said Mr. Mortimer, "that there is—do not be alarmed nor pained, and do not misunderstand me—some slight ground whereon they have been based. I have heard that Beverley paid some court to Miss May. Young people, Mr. Warwick, are thoughtless. I myself have often thought that thoughtlessness, made evident, is a sure proof of innocence. Things that are done in absolute innocence often seem to people who are not themselves innocent to be of the very essence of guilt. You are entirely in Miss May's confidence, I take it?"

"Yes," answered Warwick, with sincere emphasis. "And, what is more, I understand her. I am very well aware of the relations between herself and Mr. Beverley: he, too, knows of her engagement to me. He behaved towards her in the most manly and honourable fashion. If I were not concerned in this thing myself, sir, if I were a mere looker-on in it, I should no more believe it than believe that I do not exist, simply from what I know of Beverley."

"Then you have the greatest reason to be

thankful, my son! the only thing to do now is to crush this scandal—if we can. But I greatly fear that these two poor women will make mischief. You know the lines:

> Through slander, meanest spawn of Hell,
> And woman's slander is the worst.

—I greatly fear, I repeat, that Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock will prove vindictive. You see, my son, their pride—that terrible, terrible self-pride which leads so many of us into mistaken courses!—has been deeply touched. Perhaps you do not understand, being a Southerner, the intense pride of people like these. When you have been lord and master, dictator and autocrat all your life, you can ill brook defiance and opposition. If they come, well, revenge follows in their wake."

"It is a poor thing," said Warwick, "to seek revenge in this way."

"Most contemptible and most pitiable thing!" said the old minister. "But we are living amongst finite beings, remember. Now let us think what is best to be done. I must tell you, my son, that I took the liberty of consulting my wife upon this matter, for I have a great opinion of her wisdom. She said that I must certainly remain with you until these people

have been seen. So I brought my bag with me, and your housekeeper has already conveyed it upstairs—I must quarter myself upon you at any rate for the night."

Warwick wrung the old man's hand.

"Now," said the old minister, patting the young one's shoulder, "shall we go and see the Gills and the Hancocks to-night? I am so well rested now that I can easily walk to these houses with the help of your arm."

"The week-day service is to-night, sir," said Warwick. "I wish it were not—I do not feel very much like taking it."

"Then I shall take it for you," said Mr. Mortimer. "Come, come, we shall do very well yet. To-morrow we will go and see these ladies and have a straight talk with them; in the meantime we must not lose heart in any way. You have much to be thankful for, Mr. Warwick, in the fact that rumours and scandals do not shake your love."

Later on that afternoon, while the old minister and the young one sat at tea together, Our Bet appeared on the scene bearing a note.

"One o' Hancock's lads has just browt this here letter," she said, laying the missive before

Warwick. "Theer wor noa answer, he said, but ye wor to hev' it at once."

She lingered a moment to glance over the table and to pay particular attention to Mr. Mortimer's plate.

"I hope 'at you've gotten what you like to eyt, mestur," she said. "I cooked them mutton chops in a way 'at meks 'em tenderer nor usual—I thowt ye'd like 'em soft, cause most old gentlemen's lost their teeth."

"Excellent, excellent, worthy Elizabeth," said Mr. Mortimer hastily; "the chops are as tender as a spring chicken. What an extraordinary character that good woman is!" he remarked, when the housekeeper had left the room. "She and her brother are indeed a couple of eccentrics."

"They are good, kind-hearted people," said Warwick, who was examining the note which Elizabeth had just handed to him. "This is from Mrs. Hancock," he said; "I hope that she has not written to me after the fashion she has written to you, sir. That, I think, would try flesh and blood beyond endurance!"

"Patience, patience," said Mr. Mortimer. "Read carefully what Mrs. Hancock has to say—it may give us some further light."

Warwick cut open the envelope with mingled

feelings. Mrs. Hancock wrote a flowing Italian hand; he saw at once that though her communication covered half the sheet it was brief. He read it slowly through and turned to the old minister.

"I suppose there is some significance in this," he said; "shall I read it? 'Sir,' Mrs. Hancock writes, 'I desire to give you due notice, under section 34 of the trust-deed of Applemarney Chapel, that at the close of the service this evening I shall call for an immediate meeting of the church-members in order to bring before them a question of great importance to the congregation. Yours truly, Sarah Ellen Hancock.'"

Mr. Mortimer nodded his head.

"I am very glad I am here, Mr. Warwick," he said; "very glad indeed. Mrs. Hancock is going to raise the question in public. We cannot stop her. She is within her rights. However, we will do what we can. You had better step across the green and give Miss May some cautious information as to what is happening. If Mrs. Hancock persists, I shall call Miss May into the meeting. We will have no injustice."

Half an hour later, Warwick, entering the schoolhouse without ceremony, heard voices

and laughter in April's little parlour; he opened the door and went in. On one side of the hearth sat his aunt, knitting; on the other side sat April, sewing; between them, smoking his pipe, sat Beverley.

CHAPTER XIX

THE INQUIRY OPENS

If Warwick had been so temperamentally constituted as to have conceived and held any doubt, however small, as to Beverley's innocence in the matter raised by Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock, it would have vanished like mist before the July sun at sight of the young veterinary surgeon's face. He knew as he looked at the central figure of this little fireside group that here was a man who had nothing to conceal, whose mind was free of any secret. He grasped Beverley's hand warmly as April murmured a shy introduction between them; deep within himself he recognised a profound thankfulness that Beverley had appeared upon the scene at that particular moment.

"I thought that you had left this part of the country altogether, Mr. Beverley," he said, as

he sat down amongst them. "Are you coming back to us?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, sir," replied Beverley, "I am. I was just explaining to your aunt and to Miss May how it was that I came to be in Applemarney to-night. As you're no doubt aware, I took up a partnership in the West of England; well, Mr. Warwick, it doesn't suit me. I'm a stranger amongst strangers there; they're not my sort of people, and I'm not their sort. I wrote to Mr. Horsfall at St. Quentin's—I was his assistant for three years, you know—to tell him all about it, and he wrote back to tell me that he was by no means satisfied with his new assistant—he's a bit of a rickety customer, I think—and that if I cared to come back to him he'd take me into partnership, which was what he had never offered to do while I was here. So I came over to see him on the matter to-day, and, as luck would have it, I'd scarcely set foot in Horsfall's before an urgent message came from the Leys Farm just outside the village here—they've got a horse very bad there: in fact, I couldn't do anything for it. And Horsfall's new assistant being away on the other side of St. Quentin's, and Horsfall himself down with a bad cold, I rode out here—I've left my horse at the Cow.

I thought I'd just drop in to ask after Miss May; and that reminds me," concluded Beverley, with a wholly ingenuous smile, "that I haven't wished you joy of your engagement, sir: I wish you both every happiness that heart can desire."

Warwick responded warmly to this good wish: April murmured her thanks. Then Beverley, glancing at his watch, said that he must go—he had many things to discuss with Mr. Horsfall before bedtime, as he wanted to go West again by an early morning train. He shook hands with Miss Warwick and April, and expressed his pleasure at having seen them. Warwick began to understand that this young man was of the sort that voices its feelings and emotions in plain language.

"I must go, too," said Warwick; "I will walk across the green with you." He turned to the two women. "Before you go to chapel to-night," he said, "I want to see you both; come to the house. Mr. Mortimer, of St Quentin's, is there; in fact, he is going to take the service for me."

"Oh, is old Mortimer in the village?' said Beverley. "Now, if I'd known that, I'd have had a trap out, and then he could

have ridden back with me; I like old Mortimer, we were great friends when I lived at St. Quentin's."

"He is staying all night at the chapel-house," said Warwick. "Come about ten minutes before the service begins," he added, turning again to April. "Come to the house first."

As he and Beverley stepped out of the schoolhouse garden into the road which encircled the green, Warwick laid his hand on Beverley's arm.

"Beverley!" he exclaimed, "I have never been so glad to see a man in all my life as I was to see you to-night!"

"Oh!" said Beverley; "indeed, sir? Well, I'm glad to hear you say so, but——"

"You might—you may—have been sent here by some special dispensation of Providence!" exclaimed Warwick. "Now I want you, as a favour to me and to Miss May, to walk across the green with me to the chapel-house—I want you to see Mr. Mortimer. The fact is, something has happened in which you are concerned, in which your presence is needed."

"No?" said Beverley in evident surprise. "Well, that's a queer 'un! What's it all about, sir?"

"Come and see Mr. Mortimer," said Warwick, hurrying him forward. "No more fortunate thing could have happened than your coming here to-night," he went on, as they strode past the giant oak towards the lights of the chapel-house; "no more fortunate thing could have happened!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say so," said Beverley; "but I'm hanged if I know what it's all about. I'm not a good hand at mysteries, Mr. Warwick."

"Wait a few minutes, wait a few minutes!" said Warwick. He hurried his companion across the green, over the road, through the chapel garden, and into the house and the study. The old minister, smoking a meditative cigar before the fire, rose in astonishment at the sight of the young veterinary surgeon.

"Why, my lad!" he said, grasping Beverley's hand, "I thought you were on the other side of England!"

"Why, Mr. Mortimer," said Beverley, staring about him at his unfamiliar surroundings, "the fact is, I had to come over to St. Quentin's to see Mr. Horsfall on business, and chance sent me out here to-night. Then I met Mr. Warwick there at the schoolhouse, and he

would have me come here to see you about some affair in which he says I'm concerned. I haven't the least notion of what it is," he concluded, looking from the old minister to the young one.

Mr. Mortimer looked at Warwick.

"You have not told him, then?" he said.

"No," replied Warwick, "I thought it best that you should do that, sir."

Mr. Mortimer carefully shook off the ash from his cigar and took a thoughtful pull before he spoke again. Then he motioned Beverley, whose eyes were by this time round with wonder, to be seated.

"Very well," he said. Then turning to the young veterinary surgeon, he continued: "Beverley, you are aware that Mr. Warwick and Miss May are engaged to be married."

Beverley nodded his head.

"I've just wished them every happiness," he said heartily.

"But you may not be aware that Mr. Warwick is unfortunately not on the best of terms with two members of his congregation—Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock?"

Beverley made a face—the face of the child who bites into a sour apple.

"I don't wonder," he said laconically.

"Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock," continued the old minister, "are deeply offended at certain actions which Mr. Warwick felt himself obliged to take, and I am sadly afraid they are cherishing certain un-Christianlike feelings of revenge. And—this is the sad part of it, Beverley—they are striking at Mr. Warwick through Miss May."

Beverley's face denoted close attention, but no understanding. He was seeing nothing beyond the mere surface. And Mr. Mortimer and Warwick, watching him closely, were quick to see this, and drew their own conclusions of his general innocence and guilelessness.

"That's a beastly thing to do!" he said. "Old cats!"

Mr. Mortimer smiled, and took another puff at his cigar.

"Unfortunately," he said, "they have mixed you up in this, Beverley. I may as well tell you that Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock have written letters to me, as chairman of the district union, charging Miss May with light conduct, and in two particular instances, which they say they can prove, with impropriety—with you."

Beverley's face, which had gradually deep-

ened in colour as the old minister went on, had become almost purple by the time he had finished. He raised his riding switch and brought it down upon his gaitered leg with a resounding thwack.

"That's a lie!" he said. "I don't care whether you're ministers or not, it's a damned lie. They say that?—those two women!" He sprang up from his seat. "Here!" he exclaimed, "I'm not the sort to stand that; come on, both of you, and let's see them; I'll show them!"

"Sit down, Beverley, my lad!" said Mr. Mortimer. "Keep calm, keep——"

"You don't believe that?" exclaimed Beverley, turning to Warwick; "you don't?"

"No!" said Warwick; "I never did, for an instant."

Beverley unbuttoned his riding coat, threw it wide open, flapped his arms, executed two or three cuts in the air with his riding whip, and finally brought it down once more upon his leg.

"I've never heard a fouler lie in my life," he said. "Miss May is as innocent, as far as I'm concerned, as a new-born child. I've nothing to conceal about her—I did admire her—do

now—always shall—don't care who hears me say so—she's a clever, attractive girl—and a lot above me! I did take her about a bit—maybe I made up to her a bit. I once did kiss her, just as a young fellow will kiss a pretty girl if he's out with her, and never a thought of harm about it. But I never lost my respect for her for a minute: I've over-much respect for my mother and my own sisters for that! Miss May 'll tell you—tell anybody——"

Warwick interrupted him.

"Beverley," he said, "we don't need the slightest assurance from either you or Miss May; we're only concerned with these people. That's why I said that I was so glad to see you. They're coming here to-night. You'll stop and answer them?"

"Answer them!" exclaimed Beverley, "I should think I will answer them. I wish they were men, I'd answer them with something else than words!"

"Well, now, keep calm, my lad, and be guided by me," said Mr. Mortimer, who knew from Beverley's face and from his continual muttering to himself that he was already in a towering passion. "I'll introduce you on the scene at the proper moment. You can't think,

Beverley, of anything, any episode, any passage, during your acquaintance with Miss May on which these foolish women could have based their charges?"

Beverley spread out his hands.

"That's just it," he said. "I've been racking my brains for the last five minutes to think whatever these old Jezebels mean! I've never done a single thing, never said a single word, that could compromise Miss May in any way whatever. It's a perfect mystery to me. They're mad—that's just about it!"

A knock sounded on the garden door.

"That is my aunt and Miss May," said Warwick. "I will let them in myself and tell them what has happened."

He took Miss Warwick and April into the parlour and closed the door. And then in his aunt's presence he took the girl's hand in his and drew her to him.

"There is an ordeal before you to-night," he said gravely; "and you are to go through it like a woman."

She looked her wonder, turning from him to his aunt.

"Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill," he continued, "have written letters to Mr. Mortimer bringing a very grave charge against you

and Mr. Beverley. Mrs. Hancock has demanded a meeting of the church members to-night, no doubt to prefer that charge in public."

She gazed at him with wondering eyes; at last she smiled.

"But that is foolish—absurd!" she said. "And it is wicked!"

"It will have to be gone through," said Warwick. "Fortunately Beverley is here. He is furiously angry. Mr. Mortimer will take the service for me, and he will preside over the meeting. But you, now—will it be too much of a strain for you to take your usual duties?"

She clasped her hands tightly and looked earnestly into his face.

"Just tell me this," she said. "There was never one tiny bit of a minute, of a second, when you heard this, that you—doubted me?"

Warwick laughed; there was a note of joyousness in his laugh that acted on her like a tonic.

"Not a millionth part of a second!" he said, and kissed her.

"Then I care for nothing," she answered.

A few minutes later, as Warwick crossed

the hall to the study, Joseph Wright stopped him.

"There's a full parade of Gills and Hancocks to-night," he said wonderingly. "Ivery member of both families is here. Otherwise the congregation's only middling in numbers. Is theer owt up? What's browt t' Gills and t' Hancocks at last? No good, I reckon!"

"Never mind, Joseph," replied Warwick; "Mr. Mortimer will take the service—do whatever he asks you to do."

"Oh, aye," said Joseph, scratching his head in sheer amazement at these startling developments. "There's summut up," he said to himself, as he took his accustomed seat at the entrance to the chapel. "An' t' Gills and t' Hancocks are in it."

Mr. and Mrs. Gill and Mr. and Mrs. Hancock were seated in state in their respective halves of the front pew. Their demeanour betrayed a lofty indifference to their surroundings; they gazed upon the new glories of the chapel as if they were beneath their notice. But in the corner of the Gill half of the pew Maud Mary stared about her with inquisitive eyes which came back time after time to April, who was seated at the organ; in the corner of

the Hancock half Ruth seemed to shrink from observation, and Miss Warwick, who was watching her, noticed that the girl's face was downcast and sad.

There was a murmur of surprise and astonishment when the door which connected the chapel with the minister's house opened and Mr. Mortimer appeared in company with Warwick. Mrs. Hancock turned and glanced at Mrs. Gill: Mrs. Gill turned at the same moment and glanced at Mrs. Hancock. As for Mr. Hancock, he suddenly opened his mouth to its widest extent; as for Mr. Gill, he began to rub the point of his chin.

The old minister, entering the pulpit, turned a very stern and severe countenance upon the small congregation. The voice which presently fell upon their ears was equally stern.

"You may be surprised to see me here to-night," he said. "I have been brought here on serious business, and Mr. Warwick, as he is entitled to by the terms of your trust-deed, has placed all charge in my hands. Without saying more, I must state that two members of your congregation, Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill, have seen fit, in letters addressed to me

and to the secretary of the district union, Mr. James, to bring grave charges against your schoolmistress, Miss May. To-night, in a formal letter addressed to Mr. Warwick, Mrs. Hancock has demanded a meeting of the church in order to inquire into certain serious matters. Mrs. Hancock, I must ask you to tell me if the matters mentioned in your letters to me and to Mr. James are akin to the matters hinted at in your letter to Mr. Warwick?"

Mrs. Hancock, showing some signs of trepidation, rose, fingering the strings of her bonnet.

"Well, I'll not say that they are or they are not, Mestur Mortimer," she answered. "Of course, if you knew——"

"Are they or are they not, Mrs. Hancock?" repeated the old minister.

"Very well, then, Mestur Mortimer, they are!" said Mrs. Hancock.

"Then in that case," said Mr. Mortimer, "there will be no service in this chapel to-night. It is likely that during the meeting that is now formally opened there will be hard things said: I will be no party to desecrating this building by prefacing those hard things by a public act of worship in which, I am

afraid, we cannot all join in mutual charity. Mrs. Gill, Mrs. Hancock, I ask you both solemnly, do you desire to lay the charges against Miss May, which you have already made to me and Mr. James by letter, verbally and publicly before your fellow church-members?"

For a moment there was silence—Mrs. Gill sprang to her feet.

"If you think, Mestur Mortimer," she exclaimed with evident temper—"If you think that I'm afraid of saying in public what I've written to you in private, you're very much mistaken. I'll speak straight enough, I warrant you!"

"Aye, and so will I!" said Mrs. Hancock.

"Very good," said Mr. Mortimer. He looked across the front pew at the open-mouthed, wide-eyed congregation. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock charge Miss May with light conduct, and with impropriety of behaviour. With her name they have united that of a young man who was well known hereabouts at one time—Mr. Beverley, the veterinary surgeon. Now, we will not hold this inquiry in a corner: we will have it in the light of day. Joseph

Wright, go into the minister's house and ask Mr. Beverley to be kind enough to come here."

Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock turned to look at each other again

CHAPTER XX

MRS. HANCOCK'S CHARGE

Amongst the spectators of this scene in a drama that unexpectedly sprang into being before them there was a strained feeling of wonder as to what was coming which expressed itself in an absolute silence. The little group of men and women, gathered together in the pews immediately behind that in which the Gills and Hancocks sat, craned forward with widely opened eyes and parted lips to stare at the door though which Joseph Wright had marched with dignified importance. Their attitudes were those of people who expect to see something out of the common, who recognise, with an almost fatalistic instinctiveness, that, quite apart from any will of their own, they are called upon to be witnesses of the extraordinary. No one breathed audibly —respiration, indication of feeling, was being sternly repressed.

Beverley—flushed, haughty, obviously in a state of high indignation—walked into the chapel with his head high in the air. He carried his white billy-cock in one hand and his riding switch in the other, and, as he glared at the families in the front pew, he gripped the switch with angry and itching fingers. In his prolonged stare, first at the Hancock half of the pew and then at the Gill reserve, there was a plain indication that nothing would give him more pleasure than to visit upon Thomas Henry Gill and Benjamin Hancock the sins of their respective wives. And not content with this he marched forward until he came upon a level with the front pew, and there, holding the riding switch across his chest, he stood, a fine specimen of healthy young manhood, looking down from his superior height upon his detractors.

The wondering faces behind gazed—still wider of eye, still more open of mouth—upon this silent challenge. These observers noted that Benjamin Hancock affected to be so much unconcerned by Beverley's presence as to ignore it, and that Thomas Henry Gill made a great show of consulting his watch and yawning heavily, as if the proceedings wearied him; the keener eyes saw, however, that the

two women faced the man boldly and gave him back stare for stare. And one or two of them noted that Ruth Hancock, seated between her father and mother, bent her head and showed unmistakable signs of distress.

"Sit down, Mr. Beverley," said the old minister.

Beverley gave his accusers a final look of contempt and wheeled about.

"Yes, sir," he said significantly. "I'll sit down—and listen."

He looked around him. Warwick had taken a seat in one of the choir pews on the right of the pulpit; Beverley marched across and sat down at his side. There was something indicative in this action which stirred the spectators: the silence was broken by a sudden in-drawing of breath, and men and women nodded their heads at each other.

"Now, Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock," said Mr. Mortimer, "here is a properly constituted church-meeting, and here is Miss May and there is Mr. Beverley. As I said before, we will have no hole-and-corner work: you shall say whatever you please against these two young people in their presence. But before you do this, I have a word to say to you. Take care! take care what you let your tongues say——"

"An' if you think 'at I'm afraid o' tellin' people my mind, Mestur Mortimer," interrupted Mrs. Hancock with considerable asperity, "you're very much mistaken! I'm not afraid of saying what I think to any soul alive, ministers or no ministers."

"I repeat: take care what you let your tongues say," continued the old minister, waving Mrs. Hancock aside and looking at her and Mrs. Gill with great severity. "The tongues of women who cherish a dislike or a fancied grievance can be very bitter, and not only bitter, but unruly. I warn you both once more——"

Mr. Hancock rose slowly to his feet.

"I think, Mestur Mortimer," he said—"I think, with all respect to you, sir, 'at you're goin' a bit too far. If you'd hear what my wife and Mrs. Gill has to say before lecturin' 'em about their tongues, it would happen——"

"Sit down, Mr. Hancock," said Mr. Mortimer; "you should know better than to interrupt me. Now," he continued, turning to Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock, "I have a last word to say to you. Remember that words once spoken are not soon forgotten. If you are bringing these charges against this young woman out of a sense of duty, with no ulterior motive against

her personally, you will be forgiven if you are under a mistake. If there is in your minds any sense of personal feeling against her, you will be punished heavily, as you know, for your wickedness. I have warned you both, solemnly; now, if you are inclined to speak, do so."

There was a sudden stirring in the front pew Ruth Hancock, who had been sitting with bent head, made a quick movement to her mother's side, and, laying her hand on the elder woman's arm, spoke rapidly and apparently with great earnestness to her. But Mrs. Hancock, who during the old minister's last words had sat frowning heavily upon him, shook her daughter off with a rough shake of the shoulder and a snapped-out word. The girl wavered, looked round her as if to seek a friendly face, and then turned appealingly to her father. But Mr. Hancock received her advance as roughly as his wife—he motioned her back to her seat.

"Hold your tongue, my girl, and sit down!" he commanded in audible tones. Instead of sitting down, however, Ruth sprang to her feet. She faced the old minister with clasped hands; her face was flushed with nervous excitement, her eyes bright with tears.

"Mr. Mortimer!" she exclaimed. "Please—please can't you stop this? It—it's all wrong.

It can't be right—I know it's wrong. I—oh, mother, why will you go on with it? And you, father, why don't you stop it?"

Mrs. Hancock laid a strong hand on her daughter's arm and strove to draw her down into her seat.

"I'll stop you, you unnat'ral gel!" she said angrily. "The idee o' you standin' up agen your own mother! Sit you down and hold——"

"Mrs. Hancock," said Mr. Mortimer, "if your daughter wishes to speak, she is at liberty to do so: she is a member of the church. Go on, my dear, if you have anything to say; don't be afraid."

But Ruth had shrunk back into her seat, and now, covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears. But suddenly checking herself, she dried her eyes with an air of resolute determination and sat upright again. She looked round at her father, then at her mother, and rising swiftly to her feet she had left the pew before Mr. Hancock could stop her and had moved over to a seat near the organ where April May until that moment had sat alone. She pressed the little schoolmistress's hand as she sat down at her side, and then, turning to her impulsively, threw her arms round her and kissed her cheek.

A curious sigh went through the people—they had recognised a great moment of life. For the second time this shy, retiring girl had made public testimony of her stern determination to stand by her own principles of right and truth. A murmur that was of the nature of applause nearly broke into more audible sound: Mrs. Hancock's rising stopped it.

"There's a specimen of what bad and wicked influences can do!" she exclaimed, pointing to the two girls and regarding them with thundercloud-like brows. "A child o' mine—and an only child, too!—to openly desert her lawful parents and to——"

"Mrs. Hancock," said the old minister, "we have nothing to do with your private affairs here. Come to the point—let us deal with your business. You have some charge to bring against Miss May. Bring it."

"Aye, an' I will bring it, Mestur Mortimer!" replied Mrs. Hancock. "An' glad I am to be able to bring it to her face. I want to put it to this here church-meetin' whether it's a right an' proper thing that the childer' of this here village should be taught their lessons and what not by a young woman whose character's no better nor it should be? I'm not to be frightened, Mestur Mortimer, nor

yet I'm sure is my good friend, Mrs. Gill, by the fact that Mestur Beverley there should walk into this here chappil as bold as brass—we all know what young men are, and more shame for 'em! And I'm not afraid, either, because you, Mestur Mortimer, have showed all through to-night's proceedings nowt else but favouritism, when you owt to ha' borne i' mind 'at Mrs. Gill an' me is two o' the best-known ladies i' this district and not likely to do owt that's wrong. Howsumiver, there is a time when even a worm will turn; you can be patient for a long while, but you can't be patient for ever! I'm sure that what me an' Mrs. Gill theer has gone through during this past few months 'ud ha' vexed Job himself till he wouldn't ha' known which side o' the road to look. We've spent good money i' doin' up this chappil—there isn't a thing i' t' place that we hevn't paid for in hard cash—and we've been put upon, and insulted, and made nowt on by upstarts and good-for-nowts and a passil o' sich ungrateful nobodies as I couldn't ha' believed lived i' the village. An'——"

The carpenter rose to his feet with a weary smile.

"With all respect to you, sir," he said, addressing the old minister, "this here meetin'

wor not called to listen to Mrs. Hancock talking like what she is doin'. She's doin' no good—neyther to us nor yit herself. What's this here charge agen the schoolmistress?"

"I think you must come to the point, Mrs. Hancock," said Mr. Mortimer. "We want something definite."

"An' you shall have something definite," replied Mrs. Hancock with vehemence. "Let that theer young woman stand up and face me and answer me a question 'at I shall put to her, and then we'll see wheer we are!"

The old minister turned to where April and Ruth were sitting. But before April could rise in response to Mrs. Hancock's invitation, Ruth had sprung to her feet and faced her mother.

"Mother!" she exclaimed imploringly—"mother—don't! You know——"

April rose and quietly pushed Ruth back into her seat.

"Never mind, Ruth," she said soothingly. She turned to her challenger. "Now, Mrs. Hancock!" she continued, "what do you wish to ask me?"

Mrs. Hancock fanned herself with her handkerchief. Then she fixed the girl with the stern glance of a judge who looks upon a convicted criminal.

"I wish to ask you some questions to which I hope you'll give truthful answers," she said. "If you do, some folk that theer's no need to name will have their eyes opened."

"Yes, Mrs. Hancock, some people will," replied April.

"An' I don't want to bandy no words with you," said Mrs. Hancock. "You give me plain yeses and noes, same as they do at 'size courts. When you first came here to teach yon school, you began to keep company wi' that theer young Beverley, t' vet'nary?"

"No, Mrs. Hancock, certainly not!" replied April.

Mrs. Hancock made a gesture of impatience.

"I don't want no South-country nor yet London nicenesses o' talk," she said. "We'm plain people here and we call a spade a spade. You did keep company wi' him—you went out walking and driving wi' him all by your two selves."

"I have been here long enough, Mrs. Hancock," said April, "to know that the term which you used—'keeping company'—has a definite meaning. It means—courtship. Mr. Beverley did not court me."

"Oh, indeed, miss! An' I'll lay owt," said Mrs. Hancock triumphantly—"I'll lay owt

'at he never made love to you, as the sayin' is?"

"That," replied April, "he certainly never did."

Mrs. Hancock smote the top of the pew with a heavy hand.

"You brazen-faced young hussy!" she burst out; "do you mean to stand there and tell me, a woman o' my age, 'at a young man tak's a girl about as Beverley there took you wi'out hevin' all he can get out on her?"

The chapel suddenly burst into an uproar; Warwick and Beverley started simultaneously to their feet; the carpenter's voice was heard loudly crying "Shame!" everybody was talking at the same time. Benjamin Hancock slid along the pew and whispered something to his wife at which she shook her head. It was some moments before the old minister could restore order.

"Now, Mrs. Hancock," he said firmly, "you must withdraw that. It was unseemly in the highest degree. I'm ashamed of you."

But Mrs. Hancock stood her ground.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mestur Mortimer," she retorted, "but I shall withdraw nowt. I insist on having my questions answered. Now, young woman, did you go wi' young Beverley

theer to the Yowmanry Ball at St. Quentin's last Christmas?"

"Yes, certainly, Mrs. Hancock," replied April

"Oh, you've the grace to admit you did!" exclaimed Mrs. Hancock. She paused and looked round at the excited faces behind. "Oh, dear me! Ah! And now, perhaps, you'll tell Mestur Mortimer, and Mestur Warwick —especially Mestur Warwick—and all the rest of us wheer you stopped the night when the ball was over? Come, now, out wi' it!"

In the midst of the silence which followed, Beverley, who had been listening intently to Mrs. Hancock's question, suddenly brought his hand down on his knee with a mighty slap. Something which had been puzzling him all the evening suddenly became clear.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's it! What an old she-devil!"

"What is it, Beverley, what is it?" whispered Warwick.

"Nothing—nothing—she's found a mare's nest," said Beverley. "Gad! what a vindictive old cat she is. Well, I never!"

He glanced across at April, who was looking at Mrs. Hancock with a puzzled expression, as if her intelligence was slowly grasping at some faint comprehension of the exact meaning

of the question just addressed to her. When she spoke it was with some wonder in her voice.

"Where did I stay?" she said. "Why, I stayed at Mr. Beverley's rooms—he was kind enough to lend them to me for the night."

Mrs. Hancock sat down with a gesture of triumph. She leaned towards Mrs. Gill; they exchanged a word and a smile. In an instant Mrs. Hancock was on her feet again.

"An' you call yourself an honest woman to go stay wi' a bachelor young man at his rooms, as you term 'em—lent to you for the night! Do you?" she demanded. "You may as well tell the rest now you've admitted that."

"I did not stay with Mr. Beverley," replied April indignantly. "Mr. Beverley was not even there! I stayed with his housekeeper, Mrs. Martin. Mr. Beverley was never in the house from the time I went there to the time I left next morning."

Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill exchanged glances: in their immediate rear the carpenter exclaimed, "Well spoken, little missie! stand up to her!"

By this time the colour had come into April's face; she drew up her slight figure and turned to Mrs. Hancock with hot indignation.

"How dare you!" she cried. "How dare you, you wicked, lying woman? No wonder your own daughter turns from you!"

But Mrs. Hancock listened with a cynical smile.

"Hoity-toity!" she said. "All very fine, my young madam, an' who's goin' to believe your side o' the story, I wonder? Mestur Mortimer, I can prove 'at young Beverley theer and this here young woman were seen to enter his lodgin's at St. Quentin's, at two o'clock i' the mornin' of that theer ball—to enter 'em together, mind—and they came out together some hours later. When she says 'at he wor not theer, she's not speakin' the truth. They were theer together that night, and anybody can draw their own conclusion—I know what mine is. She says that he never entered the house—I can prove 'at he did, and didn't come out again until he came out with her. So theer!"

Beverley suddenly jumped to his feet. He laid his hat and his riding-switch on the bench on which he had been seated and walked into the centre of the space before the pulpit, whence he faced the meeting.

"Now, then!" he said with emphasis, "you'll listen to what I've got to say!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE ALLIES FALL OUT

Beverley waited for silence with a smile which seemed in a certain degree to indicate that he knew his mastery of the position and was enjoying it. He looked at Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock as a conqueror might look at the vanquished before ordering them off to instant execution. The people, still agog with ever-increasing excitement, leaned over the tops of the pews to catch his first words; to them this drama of real life was more engrossing than the work of a favourite is to the lover of the stage. It was something so out of their common: slander and scandal they knew well enough, but they were not familiar with a public thrashing out of either. Most of them experienced a vague feeling of pride in assisting at such a function—it was as if they had been called to serve upon a grand jury.

"I say," repeated Beverley after a pause,

during which he had slowly gazed from face to face and had finished up with another contemptuous summing up of his two detractors—"I say that you'll now listen to what I've got to say on this matter. And I'll say one thing straight out, for I believe there's men and women here that'll take my word as that of an honest man. There isn't one word of truth in the suggestion that this woman, Mrs. Hancock, has made. It wants the right word putting to it, and I'll put it—it's a foul lie. She's insinuated a certain thing against that young lady, Miss May, and me; I tell you there's not one particle of truth in her insinuation from start to finish."

He paused for a moment to watch the effect of his words, and a natural shrewdness of perception told him that the meeting was with him, believing in him, already free of any suspicion which Mrs. Hancock's charge might have aroused. There were murmurs of sympathy and of confidence; the carpenter, always a barometer of the state of feeling amongst all those outside the Gill and Hancock pale, was nodding his head at him encouragingly. Beverley went on.

"Now, I'll tell you the truth!" he said, with a sudden smile which invited the whole assem-

blage into his confidence; "I'm no hand at speaking, but I can tell a straight tale. Mrs. Hancock's quite right when she says that Miss May went with me to the Yeomanry Ball at St. Quentin's. Mrs. Hancock's quite right when she says that Miss May stayed that night at my rooms. And Mrs. Hancock's all wrong when she asks you to believe that I was there too. If Mrs. Hancock had taken the least trouble to make the least inquiry, Mrs. Hancock would have known that she never could have had the least inch of ground for making this charge. But, you see (and I'm sorry to think it, for I've a mother and sisters of my own, and I've always had a deal of respect for women), Mrs. Hancock wanted to make that charge. And now I'll show you how Mrs. Hancock's made something else than that charge: she's made a fool of herself."

Beverley paused again to look round his audience. Once more he smiled—an easy, confident smile of absolute sureness. He unfolded his arms and began to check off his points on the tips of his fingers.

"Now this is what happened," he continued. "It was arranged that I was to drive Miss May home after that Yeomanry Ball—on a fine night I could have rattled her home in the

dog-cart in half an hour. But before twelve o'clock—as any of you can find out by going back to the date—there was a heavy storm set in. I went outside the Town Hall to see for myself what it was like—I knew very well that it would never be possible to drive a lady home in an open conveyance. There wasn't a chance of getting a cab in the town for love or money—there aren't a dozen in the place at any time, and they were all bespoke that night. So I slipped round to my rooms and told my housekeeper, Mrs. Martin—a good, motherly woman that some of you must know—that Miss May would have to stop there, and I told her to have everything in readiness for her when the dance was over at two o'clock. Then I went back to the Town Hall and asked a friend of mine, Mr. Swanson, the lawyer, if he'd give me a bed for the night and explained why. Of course he said he would, and that settled, I told Miss May what I'd arranged. When the ball was over, I took her straight to my place, gave her into Mrs. Martin's charge, said good-night to them, and went to Swanson's. I had breakfast at Swanson's next morning, called for Miss May, and drove her straight home. That's the honest truth, the plain story of all that happened that night at St. Quentin's."

"An' if it is," said Mrs. Hancock sharply, "how is it that you and that young woman were seen to enter your lodgin's and that you didn't come out again till you came out together next mornin'? You tell me that, young man."

Beverley threw back his head and laughed. Something in the atmosphere told him that the audience was with him more than ever—believed him, accepted his story as the true one—and his laughter had the mischievous joyousness of note in it which one hears in the laughter of a schoolboy who has created a mystifying situation and is now about to give a ridiculously simple explanation of it.

"How was it?" he said. "Why, I'll tell you, Mrs. Hancock, and all the rest of you, how it was, and then you'll perhaps see things a bit clearer about it. Anybody here who knows where I lodged in St. Quentin's (there's Mr. Mortimer there: he knows, and he can prove what I say) knows very well that Mr. Swanson's house is at the back of Mrs. Martin's. Each house has a strip of garden at its back, and there's a narrow lane between the ends of the gardens. Now, when I took Miss May in to Mrs. Martin's that night and had placed her in Mrs. Martin's charge, I went straight out by

the back, down the garden, and into Swanson's by his garden and his back door. I came back the same way next morning. That's why, Mrs. Hancock, whoever it was that told you about it said that we were seen to go in at two and that we came out together at ten. That's true; but I wasn't there for more than a minute after going in or before coming out—and that's a matter which Mrs. Martin and her servant girl and Mr. Swanson and his wife could prove. You've let your bad temper help you to get hold of the wrong end of the stick this time, Mrs. Hancock."

Mrs. Hancock made no reply. She had been tying and untying her bonnet-strings during Beverley's last explanation—she now tied them firmly under her chin as if she meditated departure. Everybody was watching her—her daughter with evident pain and anxiety. Everybody, too, was waiting for her to speak. But Mrs. Hancock continued to keep silence.

"Mrs. Hancock," said Mr. Mortimer appealingly, "don't you think that after what Mr. Beverley has told us (and I must tell you that I believe every word of what he has said to be the strict truth) it will only be kind and Christian-like on your part to admit that you

have been misinformed, and to offer an apology to Miss May and Mr. Beverley for bringing this serious charge against them? Come, now!"

"An', indeed, I shall do no such thing, Mestur Mortimer!" retorted Mrs. Hancock doggedly. "I've no patience wi' young women 'at goes drivin' out wi' young men alone, and walkin' wi' 'em in lonely parts, and dancin' and ballin' wi' 'em, and goin' to theer lodgin's wi' 'em at two o'clock i' the mornin'!—it's unseemly, low conduct, and I consider 'at I've a perfect right to say what I do about it. And pray why don't you ask Mrs. Gill theer what she's got to say? I'm not the only lady i' th' congregation as objects to sich-like behaviour."

Mr. Mortimer sighed wearily.

"I had hoped that after Mr. Beverley's frank statement you would have adopted a different course, Mrs. Hancock," he said. "However, I can do no more with you. I have formed my own opinion, and I believe your fellow-members have."

The carpenter rose to his feet, pulling down his waistcoat.

"Theer isn't one of these sittin' here 'at doesn't believe every word o' what Mestur Beverley's said," he began. "We consider 'at

it's been a gre't shame to bring a charge like that theer agen——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Naylor," said the old minister; "we must take things in order. Now, Mrs. Gill, it is your turn."

For the last two or three minutes Mrs. Gill had been in whispered consultation with her husband. She now turned at Mr. Mortimer's invitation and addressed him without rising from her seat.

"Well, Mestur Mortimer," she said icily, "seeing as how things has turned out, I don't know whether I'm disposed to say anything. Of course, having been brought up in a respectable and a proper way, I don't hold wi' young gals drivin' and walkin' and goin' to dancin' parties wi' young men, nor yet stoppin' at their lodgin's wi' 'em; but as to the latter matter, well, of course, Mrs. Hancock may ha' been misinformed—we're all liable to be misinformed. An' as things stand I'm not goin' to say naught. I'll leave matters where they are. I've my own thoughts and opinions, Mestur Mortimer, same as we all have. An', of course, I've said naught agen Miss May an' young Beverley i' public, like what Mrs. Hancock has—you'll bear that i' mind."

Mrs. Hancock leapt to her feet with an agility

which was surprising in a woman of her generous figure. She turned on Mrs. Gill with angry face and blazing eyes.

"An' do you mean to sit theer, Kate Eliza Gill, and make out 'at you've naught to say!" she burst out. "You 'at's never let me alone about makin' these here complaints; you 'at's been at me mornin', noon, and night wi' tales about the young woman; do you mean to say that theer?"

"It were you, Sarah Ellen Hancock, 'at were at me more nor what I was at you wi' tales about the young woman," replied Mrs. Gill with great suavity. "I never was the sort o' woman to deal wi' tittle-tattle of any sort. You it was that first came to me wi' the tale that you've told to-night—the tale that you'd got from your dressmaker in St. Quentin's."

Mrs. Hancock smote the front of the pew.

"An' didn't you come to me wi' th' tale 'at you'd got from your shepherd, Timothy Barber?" she demanded fiercely. "Why don't you tell that straight out as you told it to me? Why don't you?"

Mrs. Gill bowed her head with a movement of dignified non-acquiescence.

"As I've already remarked, Mrs. Hancock," she said, "I've decided to say naught no more.

I know when to hold my peace if some others that I could name doesn't."

"Mrs. Gill," said the old minister, "this will not do. You asked for this inquiry and you must go through with it. You may not be aware, either you or Mrs. Hancock, that by the publication of these letters to me and to Mr. James, you have both rendered yourselves liable to prosecution. You are both, I feel sure, practically at the mercy of both Miss May and Mr. Beverley. Now, let us have the truth. What is this about Timothy Barber?"

But Mrs. Gill would not answer. She repeated the dignified movement of refusal to speak and remained silent.

"If you please, sir," said Joseph Wright, "an' if Mestur Beverley there would go wi' me, I can hev' Timothy Barber here in two minutes, more or less. He's allus at the Cow at this time."

Beverley laid hold of his riding switch and started up.

"Come on, Joseph!" he said; "I'll make him come, sharp enough."

When the two had gone, Mrs. Gill rose and motioned to her husband.

"As I've naught no more to say, Mestur Mortimer," she said, "an' as I don't believe

in wastin' vallyble time, I'll say good-night to you; I don't see any use i' stayin' here, wheer everything's all on one side."

"That will not do, Mrs. Gill," said the old minister. "I must ask you to remain until we have concluded this inquiry."

But Mrs. Gill left the front pew, and, followed by Mr. Gill, moved towards the door. Mr. Mortimer's brows gathered into a frown.

"Mr. Naylor," he said, "lock that door and let no one out or in until Mr. Beverley and Joseph Wright come back with Timothy Barber."

The carpenter hastened to obey the minister's bidding: Mr. and Mrs. Gill found themselves imprisoned. They remained standing in the aisle, pictures of wrathful indignation. And presently their own shepherd, shivering with a fear which he could not have felt more acutely had he been dragged before the dread 'sizes, appeared in the relentless custody of Joseph Wright and Beverley, who hurried him forward into full view.

"Now, then!" said Beverley menacingly, "what was it you said to Mrs. Gill there about me and that young lady? Out with it and tell the truth—you'll be before the magistrates to-morrow if you don't. Come!"

"It was really nowt, sir!" protested Timothy

Barber, half whimpering. "Shoo wor allus at me, wor t' missis theer, allus axein' if I'd ever seen you and t' schooilmistress love-makkin' and sich-like—shoo ewesed to gi' me a pint or two o' beer, like, when I went into t' kitchen at neets, an' then shoo'd start on wi' questions. An' I did tell her 'at I once see'd ye an' t' schooilmistress go into t' owd barn down theer i' t' Hollows an' stop theer a piece, an' shoo's made more out on it. That wor all—I'm Gospel-shure it wor!"

"Yes, that was all!" exclaimed Beverley. "Now then, you people, hear the truth about that. I was driving Miss May along the highroad down there by the Hollows one afternoon when a very heavy thunderstorm came on. We went into the barn to shelter —horse, trap, and all. This lying scoundrel was there, too; he was with us all the time of our stay there. Isn't that true, you liar?"

"Y—yes, sir," whimpered Timothy Barber. "It's true, is that theer."

"Then why didn't you tell your mistress the truth?"

"She wo'd hev' me tell her summat," pleaded Timothy. "Shoo wor allus at me—hed I seen this, that, and t' other? I wor fair stalled o' bein' axed questions—I tell'd her that theer to

get shut on 'em. An' I didn't say nowt wrong. I nobbut said 'at I'd once seen ye and her go into a barn and stop theer a piece."

Beverley flung the shepherd away from him.

"Ah, you——" he said.

"Let him go," said Mr. Mortimer. "And you may go now, Mrs. Gill, and you, Mrs. Hancock. We have heard enough, I think. This has been the most pitiable evening I have ever spent in my ministerial career, and I hope——"

The carpenter had risen and was stretching out a hand.

"Just a minute, sir," he said. "As all this has been said before the church-meetin', I think the least we can do is to say before the meetin' ends 'at we don't believe i' these wicked charges. I propose a resolution to the effect that havin' heerd what theer's been to say agen Miss May and Mestur Beverley we don't believe a word on't—not one word!"

"An' I second that theer wi' the gre'test pleasure i' life!" said another man, getting his words in with subtle adroitness before two or three others who had risen to their feet with him.

Outside the chapel Beverley caught up the

Gills and planted himself squarely in front of them.

"I don't know what Miss May will do," he said determinedly, "but for myself I'll just tell you this. If you don't send a full and complete apology to Mr. Swanson at once, together with a hundred pounds for the St. Quentin's Dispensary, I'll have the law of you, Mrs. Gill. Don't you make any mistake; I've the whip hand, and I'll teach you that evil-tongued women like you need a sharp lesson."

Then he turned back to encounter the Hancocks and to deliver the same ultimatum. He reflected, as he subsequently returned to Warwick's study, that his announcement had been received by Hancocks and Gills alike with a silence which was significant of submission.

CHAPTER XXII

CHURNING-DAY

Mr. and Mrs. Hancock, walking home together through the winter-clad lane which led to the Manor Farm, preserved a silence eminently characteristic of both. Mrs. Hancock was angry—angry for a multiplicity of reasons, several of which she would not have spoken of to any living person, and last of all to her husband. Mr. Hancock was labouring under an uneasy impression that the women had made a mess of matters—how or just why he could not yet satisfactorily explain to himself. He was still more uneasy about Beverley's threat—from long experience of life he knew a man when he met one, and the young veterinary's words and manner had borne the stamp of purpose and earnestness. It seemed to Mr. Hancock, marching somewhat wearily along over the sodden roadside path in the lee of his Juno-like spouse, that perhaps the best thing

to do, all circumstances taken into consideration, would be to send a cheque for one hundred pounds to Beverley's solicitor and have done with what, after all, had turned out a bad business. He was not to a hundred pounds, nor to a good many hundreds for the matter of that, he informed himself, with the serene consciousness of his value as a warm man, and he was tired and sick of quarrelling. The women had been in the wrong and there was an end of it. Well, women were women, and always would be women, and now and then—and sometimes oftener than not—men had to pay for their follies and mistakes. Let him and Thomas Henry Gill pay up and have done; and over a friendly glass and a quiet cigar console themselves with philosophical speculations as to what the Lord's intention was when he permitted Adam to be prevailed upon by Eve. And coming to this conclusion Mr. Hancock sighed involuntarily.

"An' well may you sigh, Benjamin Hancock," said his wife, as the two—grey shadows in a heavy night—marched along with slow and even pace. "Well may you sigh after such a time as your wife has endured of in that theer chappil which her money's gone to beautify. I'm sure I don't know what's comin'

over th' people i' these days: the idee o' me bein' flouted and made light on i' presence o' th' congregation, as is no more nor dirt under my feet! An' my own dowter!—to go an' side wi' the enemy agen her own mother!—if the bad time as is talked about at the end o' th' Good Book isn't nigh at hand, I'm sure I don't know when it'll come."

"Why, why, mi lass," said Mr. Hancock, in his most placatory tones, "I don't think Ruth meant no disrespect to neyther you nor me: I think she only wanted to sort o' let th' schoolmistress see 'at there were somebody to stand by her, like. An', of course, it is a serious thing to make charges o' that nature agen a young woman; I could wish, Sarah Ellen—I could wish 'at you and Thomas Henry Gill's wife had investigated that theer matter a little closer and deeper afore you'd made it as public as what you have done. Of course, I know 'at from information received you thowt you were justified i' doin' what you did, but you see, my lass, it all goes to nowt when it's confronted wi' the real truth. Yon theer young Beverley's housekeeper's a thoroughly respectable woman—theer's nobody i' St. Quentin's 'ud ivver dream o' doubtin' her word. I could ha' wished 'at ye'd been a bit circumspecter, Sarah

Ellen—I could, indeed. It'll cost me a hundred pound."

"An' don't you go talkin' to me, Benjamin Hancock, about no hundred pounds!" said Mrs. Hancock with asperity. "If theer's any question about payin' any hundred pounds, I shan't come to you for it. I'm not wi'out money, even if I hev' laid out so much on the chappil, and it's my own, too, and didn't come out of your pockets, neyther. An' don't you go makin' excuses for your dowter, as is my dowter, too, or else I'll let you an' her see 'at I'm not goin' to be thraypsed i' my own house! mark you that, Benjamin Hancock, as I've been a good and faithful wife to all these years, and nivver been dependant on for nowt, havin' money o' my own. An' I'll tell my lady a piece o' my mind when we get in; I'll hev' no dowter o' mine affrontin' me i' th' presence of a passil o' nobodies!"

But when they got in Ruth had retired to her own chamber, having left word with a sleepy maid that she was too tired to stay up for her father and mother. Thereupon, Mrs. Hancock soundly rated the maid for some fancied omission in the contents of the supper-tray, and subsequently scolded the menservants in the kitchen because they had not

already gone to bed. Gloom hung heavily over the Hancock *ménage* that night, and when Mrs. Hancock had retired, Mr. Hancock sat up later than usual, and drank more than his usual allowance of whisky, and read the *Mark Lane Express* upside down, and wondered why some features of human existence were what they were. When he at last climbed the stairs, it was with a sincere and steadfast determination to post a cheque for one hundred pounds to Beverley's solicitor first thing in the morning, and so put an end to what he now considered the worst business he had ever been mixed up with in all his life.

But there were more troubles and trials and manifold difficulties in store for Mr. Hancock. Next day was the weekly churning-day at the Manor Farm, and Mrs. Hancock, in accordance with custom, rose at an early hour to superintend the operations which transformed her accumulated store of cream into so many pounds of golden-tinted butter. It was a well-known fact to every member of the Hancock establishment that churning-day was a test of the mistress's temper. If the butter "came" quickly, and all the dairying operations were over by the middle of the forenoon, Mrs. Hancock was gracious, calm, and equable for

the rest of the day; if the contents of the churn proved refractory and matters suffered a delay extending beyond noontide, Mrs. Hancock made everybody pay for it, exacting a full pound of flesh in each case. Naturally, churning-days in summer were much more feared than churning-days in winter; nevertheless, on churning-day, Mr. Hancock always had business afar off which kept him away from his own premises from immediately after breakfast until tea-time in the afternoon. In his opinion Mrs. Hancock was best left to herself on these occasions.

That particular morning, the weather being in a good humour, the cream "gathered" with commendable speed, and the fact was announced to Mrs. Hancock as she sat down to breakfast. But, in Mrs. Hancock's then state of mind, anything was sufficient whereupon to found a complaint against life's general perversity, and she uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"I'm sure I never knew a churnin'-day when there wasn't something went wrong!" she said. "Here's the butter come a full half-hour afore I expected it, and Ruth's not down to help me to make it up. An' now I shall hev' to hurry over my breakfast as if I were a poor

relation 'at's asked in at th' end of a feast, and me wi' a hard mornin's work i' front of me. An' what can that gel be doin' stoppin' i' her chamber all this time, I wonder?"

She handed Mr. Hancock his coffee and went up the front staircase to her daughter's room. To her great surprise the door was locked. She could not remember that Ruth had ever locked herself in before, and, with a sudden fear that something was wrong, she knocked loudly upon the panels and shook the handle of the latch. Ruth's voice, calm and steady, answered this urgent summons:

"Yes, mother?"

Mrs. Hancock's wrath was stirred by this unemotional reply.

"Are you aweer 'at it's eight o'clock, and after, and churnin'-day, and the butter come already, Ruth Hancock?" she demanded. "An' what might you be doin' wi' your door locked, an' i' your own father's house, wheer theer's neither thieves nor murderers, I would like to know? Open this here door at once, miss!"

Ruth answered in the same calm tones:

"I shall be down in a few minutes, mother."

Mrs. Hancock retreated, wondering what was toward. She returned to the parlour,

helped herself liberally to eggs and bacon, poured out her first cup of tea, and began to breakfast. On the other side of the table, Mr. Hancock ate cold pigeon pie and read the *Yorkshire Post*, which he had contrived to prop up against the toast-rack. Neither looked up when Ruth entered the room.

"A deal o' consideration you show, my gel, an' a throng day like what this is like to be," said Mrs. Hancock as she dropped a lump of sugar into a cup. "After such an un-dowterly exhibition as you made of yourself last night at the chappil I should ha' said 'at the least you could do 'ud ha' been to get up and save your poor mother as much work as you could. An' I should like to know what you mean by lockin' your chamber door agen me, an'——"

Mrs. Hancock, passing a cup of tea over the table to her daughter's accustomed place, suddenly paused, stricken dumb by astonishment. She had raised her eyes and seen Ruth attired for going out, whereas she should have been dressed, like her mother, in the white garments wherein they always made up the butter. Mrs. Hancock set down the tea-cup with a bang.

"Mercy on us, Ruth Hancock!" she ex-

claimed; "what's the meaning of all this tom-foolery? It isn't market-day—it's churnin'-day. What have you got your hat and jacket on for, and your goin'-out dress?"

Mr. Hancock raised his eyes from the *Yorkshire Post* and gazed at his daughter wonderingly. He was not a man of much perception, but he saw that Ruth was very pale and that there were dark shadows under her eyes; he also saw, with some surprise, and some instinctive fear for which he could not have accounted, that there was a new atmosphere about her—an atmosphere of courage and determination. Something in her eyes seemed to be looking at far-off things and welcoming them.

Ruth took the cup which her mother had set down and drank thirstily of its contents, but she showed no disposition to seat herself at the table. She looked at her mother steadily and with a certain grave displeasure which made Mrs. Hancock suddenly feel as if a chill had stricken her to the marrow.

"I have my hat and jacket on because I am going away, mother," she answered quietly.

Mrs. Hancock, who had resumed her knife and fork, dropped them upon her plate with a crash.

"Goin' away!" she exclaimed. "An' pray where might you be goin', my gel, wi'out your father's leave an' mine? Hoity-toity! I wonder what we shall hear next!"

"There is no necessity to ask father's permission nor yours, mother," replied Ruth. "I am of full age and my own mistress. I am going to my Aunt Wilson's, at Leeds, for a few days until I can find a situation."

"A sittywation!" exclaimed Mrs. Hancock. "A sittywation! An' what do you want wi' a sittywation?—talkin' about yourself as if you were a common domestic, and you your father's dowter!"

"I am fully qualified to teach music in a school," Ruth answered; "that is what I intend to do."

Mr. Hancock, who had listened to this conversation open-mouthed, laid down his knife and fork.

"Here, here, my lass!" he said; "do you know what ye're talking about? Leave home? Situation? What's the matter?"

Ruth sipped a little more tea. She still remained standing at the side of the table, and showed no inclination to take a seat.

"The matter is, father," she replied, "that I cannot stay any longer in your house. I

have borne it as long as I could. I am your daughter, and I want to keep my respect for you both, but my own self-respect is more to me than my respect for you. You have both acted wickedly in respect to Miss May, and you show no sign of being sorry for it. I have begged you, mother, almost on my knees, to give up your persecution of her—I told you how wicked it was to encourage Miss Pennythorne in those stories, and to talk to Mrs. Gill as you did—and you wouldn't listen to me, your daughter, your only child. And I asked you, father, to stop it: I asked you how you would like any one to say such things about me, even if there had been some excuse for them, and you wouldn't listen to me. It is wrong, cruel! and I can't bear it any longer! I can't breathe in this house!" concluded poor Ruth, with a passionate gesture which was magnificent because it was unconscious and involuntary—"I can't breathe!"

The man and woman facing each other at the table stared at their daughter as if some doubt as to whether she was their own property had suddenly arisen in their minds. On Mrs. Hancock's plump cheek a spot of angry colour flamed into evidence.

"An' how dare you dictate to your own

father and mother, you unnat'ral gel, you!" she burst out. "A-takin' sides——"

Ruth lifted her head.

"It's no use, mother," she said calmly. "I'm quite willing, and anxious, to say good-bye to you kindly, but if you go on like that I shall just walk out of the house and go right away. I've plenty of money in my pocket, and if you won't send my things after me, I can buy a fresh supply. But I'm going. It's your own fault. You knew those charges against Miss May were not true; you knew that Miss Pennythorne was nothing but a scandal-monger and a tale-bearer, and you encouraged her, in spite of all that I urged on you. No, it's no use, father; it's no use now! I can be as stubborn as you are, and I shall go: I tell you, I can't breathe here."

"Now, then, come, come, my lass!" said Mr. Hancock. "Come, now! you're a bit excited, and happen you feel a bit keenly about these here unfortunate events. But I'm sure your ma wouldn't ha' said owt agen the schoolmistress if she'd hadn't felt justified i' doin' so. You mon't say things about your ma, my lass. Now, then, go and tak' off your things and help your ma with th' butter and let the storm blow over, and let's be at peace."

Ruth made no answer to this. She left the room and went upstairs, and Mr. Hancock helped himself to another slice of pigeon-pie. And suddenly he burst out in a fashion which made Mrs. Hancock tremble.

"I wish ye an' that owd cat, Kate Eliza Gill, had had yer tongues cutten out afore ye let 'em wag as yer did!" he said, with a fierce brutish malevolence. "Damn yer interference wi' what didn't concern yer! I shall hev' to pay a hundred pound for it to-day, but that's nowt to hevin' to hear what my onnly dowter said just now. Such-like as ye an' Kate Eliza Gill owt to be ducked i' t' village pond: that's what they would ha' done wi' both on yer i' t' owd days. An' ye assured me 'at it wor all true!"

Then he pushed his plate away and strode out to the stables, and presently mounted his horse and rode off to find Thomas Henry Gill, with whom he entered into conclave. And, in the parlour of the Lowlands, they each wrote out a cheque, after which, being securely closeted together, they had some conversation which it was well their wives did not hear.

Mr. Hancock returned home at noon—an unwonted hour for him on a churning-day. His wife, frightened, tearful, trembling like a

leaf in spite of her big bone and muscle, met him at the door.

"She's gone!" she said. "It was no use—I couldn't do naught with her, Benjamin. She sent for a cab, and she's gone."

Mr. Hancock uttered a fierce imprecation. He pushed his wife aside and strode into the parlour where the table was laid for dinner—for two people only. He smote his hand upon the bell.

"Here, you!" he said, as the startled maid ran in. "Clear them things off, d'ye hear—clear 'em off! There'll be neither bite nor sup in this house till my lass comes back!"

Then, with a sudden paroxysm of fury, he seized the snowy cloth by one corner and sent silver and glass and steel flying to the floor in one wild crash.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SCAPEGOAT AND THE PEACE-OFFERING

About three o'clock that afternoon Miss Warwick walked into the schoolroom and approached the mistress's desk. There was the suspicion of a queer smile in the corner of her lips and of a certain half-cynical enjoyment of something amusing in her eyes. April, who was somewhat listlessly listening to her first class's attempts to read an extract from the *Spectator* of Steele and Addison, and wondering why the compilers of reading books have an idea that village children are best reared on the classics, looked at Miss Warwick wonderingly. Then the elder lady smiled openly.

"Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock are in the parlour," she said, bending over the schoolmistress's desk. "They are in their very best gowns, cloaks, and bonnets, and their solemnity is as profound as their politeness is oppressive. It is my opinion that they have come to sue for mercy. Go to them—I will hear the children read."

April rose, looking somewhat pale and scared. Miss Warwick laid a hand on her shoulder and pushed her towards the door.

"Go along!" she whispered, with a whimsical smile. "And be gentle with them, especially Mrs. Hancock—I believe she's been weeping."

April paused for a moment outside the door of the parlour. If these two malevolent women had really come to entreat her forgiveness, it would pain her more than their denunciation of her had pained her. That women, old enough to have mothered her, should be placed in such a position!—she felt as if all the shame of it would be reflected in herself. It did not seem fitting that women whose hair was already streaked with grey should be constrained to apologise to a girl. In fancy she heard them say they were sorry; in fancy she pictured her own confusion in answering then; resentment or anger against them she felt none. She would have given much to have the interview over: it seemed intolerable that she should have to put these two women to shame.

As she stood there with her hand on the door of the parlour, she was halting, if she had but known it, on the threshold of one more of the secret chambers of femininity which had not yet been opened to her. She was very

ignorant and very innocent of the manifold complexities of her own sex—a wave of these complexities, brimming out of an inexhaustible ocean, was about to overwhelm her and leave her gasping and laughing as children laugh when the tears are not far behind the laughter.

She opened the door at last and went in, shy, self-conscious. She scarcely knew what she expected to see, but there was some half-formed vision in her mind of two penitents, sorry and ashamed. When she looked around her a sudden illumination flooded her soul. She possessed an unusually keen sense of humour, and she saw that Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill were invincible. They would keep the centre of the stage until the final curtain fell.

They were in their purple and fine linen, and if Mrs. Hancock's Roman-matron countenance showed signs of recent grief, it was proud, stern, and resolved. It was also bland and mollifying—she might have been a gracious lady who had come on an errand of mercy to a transgressing sister. Similar characteristics marked Mrs. Gill's sharp features and quick twinkling eye. Here were no dishevelled penitents each ready to cry "Peccavi!" and to kiss the hem of the wronged one's garments; here, rather, were two very digni-

fied, highly-respectable ladies, who sat bolt upright in their chairs and looked much more like receiving homage than yielding it.

April found herself shaking hands with her visitors and murmuring some banal remark about the weather. Then she discovered that she was seated opposite to them, and that they were favouring her with glances compounded of benevolence and gracious pity.

"Miss May," said Mrs. Hancock in tones of exquisite suavity, "there has been a great mistake made—a great mistake."

"A great mistake," said Mrs. Gill.

"There is no worse thing in this world," said Mrs. Hancock solemnly, "than what tittle-tattle and back-bitin' is. Me an' Mrs. Gill here deeply regrets that we should ha' been made the victims on it."

Mrs. Gill sighed the sigh of one who has been grievously wronged.

"Of course," continued Mrs. Hancock, whom April was now watching with fascinated eyes—"of course, me and Mrs. Gill has been sadly deceived by one as has eaten our bread and seen the colour of our money more times nor it's necessary to name. However, Miss May, it's a wicked world, and we can't expect no different."

Mrs. Gill sighed more profoundly than ever.

"But as soon as Mrs. Gill an' me learned the real truth and found out how cruelly and wickedly we'd been deceived by a snake as we might ha' been said to have warmed in our bosoms more than once," continued Mrs. Hancock, "we said—'Well,' we said, 'the plain duty of us both is to see that that poor young woman is righted,' we said. An' so, Miss May, we've come to tell you that you needn't think no more about it, because me and Mrs. Gill has taken the matter up, and what we shall say to the one as set these here wicked stories about is what she will not forget to her dying day, I'll warrant!"

"No, I'm sure!" said Mrs. Gill, whose thin lips locked themselves in a straight line when she had spoken.

"So, as I said, Miss May," concluded Mrs. Hancock, "you may set your mind at rest, for when me and Mrs. Gill undertakes anything, we carry it through. And glad we are to find that such wicked stories is naught but stories, for which we shall speak our minds free to her as set them a-going!"

"But please, Mrs. Hancock," said April entreatingly, "please—please don't say anything to anybody on my account! It was, as you said, all a mistake, and now it's all over and done

with, and—and I don't want any more said about it. Please don't scold any one, whoever it is!"

But Mrs. Hancock had risen and was settling the strings of her bonnet. Her expression was one of inflexible determination. She shook her head.

"No, no, my dear!" she said. "And very Christian-like it is on your part, I'm sure, but me an' Mrs. Gill couldn't think of allowin' persons as abuses their position to tell us wicked stories without informin' them of the real state of our feelin's to them. Mrs. Gill and me is on our way now to tell a certain person what we think of her."

Then Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill went out to Mrs. Hancock's pony-trap, which was in charge of a boy at the schoolhouse gate, and they climbed in and drove away in the direction of St. Quentin's, bestowing the blandest and most gracious of smiles upon the schoolmistress, who was so much impressed by their grandeur and nobility that she was half-minded to drop them a profound curtsey. She gazed after them until they had rounded the far corner of the green, and then she returned to the parlour and suddenly burst into a wild, uncontrolled shriek of laughter.

In one of the smaller streets of St. Quentin's,

a very quiet and unpretentious street, there was a little house which from the outside looked as if there might be just sufficient room inside to turn round in, and even to swing a cat. It had a frontage of two small windows and one door; the door was painted green and lightened by the possession of a brass plate whereon appeared the words:

MISS PENNYTHORNE,
Dressmaker.

Behind that door lay a very narrow passage, and on its left hand side there was a tiny parlour, furnished with a miniature chiffonier, a well-worn suite of mahogany upholstered in faded green rep, some wax-flowers and shells on the mantelpiece, and two oil-paintings, representing Miss Pennythorne's papa in the uniform of a Humber pilot, and Miss Pennythorne's mamma in a cashmere shawl of many colours. There was a smell of new clothes always in this parlour, and usually some portion of a lady's gown reposing upon the centre table or on the back of a chair.

Here, an hour after they had left the schoolhouse at Applemarney, sat Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill, solemn and severe. To them entered Miss Pennythorne, a maiden lady of fifty who had once been pretty, but was now

faded, withered, left behind, and yet in possession of a good figure and a certain amount of dignity. She smiled as she saw her visitors; they were good customers and paid cash.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Hancock; good afternoon, Mrs. Gill," said Miss Pennythorne. "I was quite surprised when the girl said you were both here."

"There's more reasons for surprise nor one i' this wicked world, Miss Pennythorne," said Mrs. Hancock, with suggestions of dark meaning. "Not that aught could surprise me and Mrs. Gill there—no!"

"No, indeed!" said Mrs. Gill.

Miss Pennythorne gazed inquiringly at her visitors. She saw something was wrong, and instead of speaking she kept silence.

"Miss Pennythorne," said Mrs. Hancock solemnly, "you've worked for me and Mrs. Gill these number o' years."

"I have, Mrs. Hancock," replied Miss Pennythorne.

"And always been driven in and out from this town to Applemarney, and had breakfast and dinner and tea, and very oft a little basket o' something to bring home wi' you, to say nothing of your money allays bein' paid ready and reg'lar," said Mrs. Gill.

Miss Pennythorne's pale cheek showed a spot of colour. She looked steadily at her interlocutors.

"You have always been very kind," she said, "and I believe I have worked very well for you—and very cheaply."

Mrs. Hancock became more judicial in manner.

"Miss Pennythorne, you've led me an' Mrs. Gill theer into trouble. You told me stories about Miss May, our schoolmistress, and that theer young Beverley, which proves to be untrue," she said. "Of course, me an' Mrs. Gill, bein' the most responsible members of our chappil, had to investigate such improper charges, an'——"

"Now, Mrs. Hancock," said Miss Pennythorne, "you are saying what is not true! I merely told you that on the night of the Yeomanry Ball I, happening to be wakeful and looking out of my window, saw Mr. Beverley take Miss May to his lodgings, and saw them leave again in the morning. I naturally supposed that she was staying with his housekeeper, who is a very respectable woman indeed, and I never——"

"An' do you suppose, Miss Pennythorne, 'at you can make reflections such as them

theer on a young lady's conduct wi'out doin' harm?" demanded Mrs. Hancock. "You've given me an' Mrs. Gill theer a deal o' pain by circulatin' such wicked stories. An' you'll please to understand that Mrs. Gill an' me will in future take our patronage to Miss Seamsby, at th' other end o' the town street. I can't do wi' no tale-bearin' people i' my house."

"Nor can I i' mine," said Mrs. Gill, with a tone of great decision.

Miss Pennythorne stood up. There was a good deal of quiet dignity about her.

"Very well, ladies," she said. "It is fortunate that I am not quite dependent upon your patronage. Allow me to open the door for you."

Outside in the little street Mrs. Hancock sniffed.

"There's nobody can give theirsens the airs that poor folk can!" she said. "The idee!—bowin' us out as if she were a duchess! I hev' no patience wi' owd maids, sister Gill, and ——they're nowt but a passil o' false-teethed, false-haired frumps—no wonder they niver managed to catch a man. An', now then, we'd best see about that theer present—of course, it'll be the best policy to give the young woman summat, and then we shall be quits wi' her."

That night, as Warwick sat with his aunt and April in the schoolhouse parlour, there was ushered into their presence Joseph Wright, who carried a parcel of considerable size upon his shoulder. This he set down upon the table. After which he took off his hat and turned to April.

"About half an hour ago—it might be more and it might be less," he said—"Mistress Hancock and Mistress Gill drave up to our gate i' Hancock's pony-conveyance and sent a lad in for me. They 'livered this here box into my charge and said 'at I wor to convey it to Miss May at the schoolhouse wi' all possible speed. I couldn't set off wi' it theer and then, 'cause me an' our Bet wor havin' our suppers and she wouldn't consent for me to leave t' table, but as soon as we'd risen fro' t' feast I cam' straight away wi' it. I would like to know what theer is i' that theer box —theer's summat 'at jingles. Oh, aye! an' Mistress Hancock, shoo said 'at I wor to 'liver it wi' her and Mistress Gill's complements. I wonder what it contains!"

"You'd better wait and see it unpacked, Joseph," said April, who was wondering mightily what Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Gill had sent her. "How can we open the box?"

"I thowt o' that theer," said Joseph, and produced certain tools from his pockets. "I'll oppen it i' two minutes."

When the brown paper wrappings were removed, a plain wooden packing-case was revealed to sight. This, opened by Joseph, proved to contain a small and elegant walnut chest, carefully packed about with soft paper. And on the surface of the walnut chest lay a sheet of note-paper, whereon these words were written in a flowing Italian hand :

To Miss May, with love from Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Hancock.

Within the walnut chest were many things carefully folded in tissue paper. Drawn from their receptacle, divested of their wrappings, these objects were finally marshalled upon the table in the form of a very massive and very handsome solid silver tea-and-coffee service. And it was a strange coincidence that the principal feature of the design embossed upon each separate article was that of a dove, bearing in its mouth the olive branch of peâce.

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Long Time. con-

I like to fancy God in Paradise
Lifting a finger over the
rhythmic swing
Of chiming harps with song and
eager eyes
Turned inward listening—
The Anthem stilled—the Angels
leaning there
Above the golden walls—the
morning sun
Of Christmas bursting flower-like
with the prayer
"God bless us every one!"

J. Whitcomb Riley